



VOLUME 2

SATO FUMINO

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Beast † Blood, Volume 2
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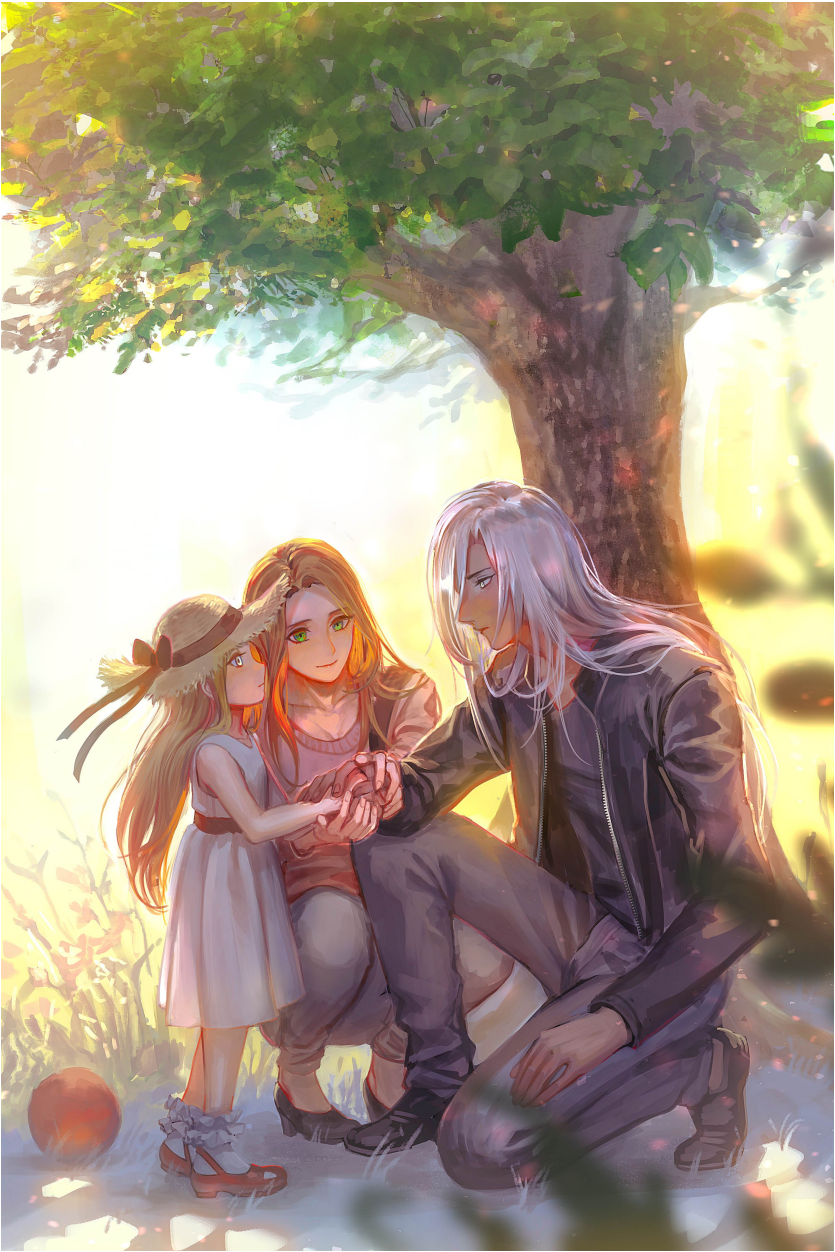
Published in the United States of America

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First Digital Edition: August 2020

ISBN-13: 978-1-945341-41-0





†Chapter 1: Trapped Wolf†

IT was early afternoon the day after he spent that bittersweet night with Euphemia that ended in disaster.

Zelaide made it to morning without sleep.

Euphemia acted a little awkward when she woke up at the crack of dawn and confined herself to the laboratory saying she might as well get back to work since she was already there. And since he didn't think she needed him to protect her anymore, Zelaide left Biotech in the gray of morning before the rain stopped.

No one was on the same floor when he left, but there was a serious risk of researchers arriving at any time. Zelaide exited the laboratory using the same route he took the prior night and waited for daybreak in the Wilds.

The bottom of the sky brightened just as the heavy rains started to let up, and the clouds scattered with daybreak's radiance.

Dawn always visited this planet the same way.

Yesterday's corruption was washed away and a new day began.

Nojima's Workshop on Wheels arrived shortly after daybreak.

The heavy semi-truck loaded with parts shook as it barreled through pools of water scattered around the Wilds and stopped in front of Zelaide.

"Top of the mornin' to ya! Or maybe not? Ya look crustier than usual, boss man. Didn't sleep?"

"Stop yapping, start fixing."

"Roger, roger."

The surprisingly perceptive mechanic cheerfully got to work despite not getting much sleep himself.

As an apology for what happened yesterday, he worked extra hard and repaired the broken sensor in under three hours.

Zelaide drove back to Gothic City after scheduling repairs for the body to happen at a later date. He felt restless at home so he pulled an old motorcycle out of the garage and let Manuela know he was coming.

In an odd turn of events, he felt as if he was going to be swept away by the roiling waves of affection smoldering in him since last night. He had planned on never meeting with Manuela again, but he didn't have anyone else to talk to. At this point he was desperate for a distraction.

†††

“OOH my, Zel? To what do I owe the pleasure? Have you ever come this soon after a visit?” Manuela asked with a smile. “Then again, we didn't do anything during your last visit.” Though she wore revealing clothes that exposed her voluptuous chest, her greeting was dry and unprovocative.

“I didn't come to do anythin' with ya today either. I brought your kid a motorcycle like I promised. I left it in the back,” Zelaide replied morosely.

Zelaide usually met up with her at the finest apartments she owned when he came to take care of certain urges, since that doubled her profits, but for any other business he preferred to use inconspicuous locations in the filthiest part of Downtown.

This particular apartment was located in Out Circle's District G where they had met a week ago after Zelaide was attacked by Inferni. The area was far from safe, but Manuela had apartments in every part of the city to better serve each client's unique needs.

Zelaide's official reason for visiting today was to drop off one of his older motorcycles for her son since he heard the boy didn't have any means of getting around.

“You're giving him a motorcycle?”

“It's an old model, but it runs well.” Zelaide left the motorcycle at the backdoor and slipped inside the apartment.

“Thank you, darling. Sean will be thrilled. He said he hasn't saved up enough to buy a car yet.”

“Is he still hitting the books?”

“Sure is. He's sharing a place with a good friend, so I don't get to see him much these days.”

Manuela looked the part of a doting mother when she spoke about her son. Zelaide noticed she had taken on the same look with him lately too.

“...So? That's not the only reason you came today, is it?” she

asked, changing the topic from her son.

"Yeah... I had some questions for you..." Zelaide trailed off. The way Manuela assessed his face with a knowing smile made him feel like a boy caught in the act.

"I'm sure you do. You specified this location and reek of another female... Smells like you did it last night. Who with? Doesn't seem like my replacement."

Manuela's curiosity was piqued. For years Zelaide had never smelled of another woman.

"I know most of the females in these parts but don't recognize that smell. I haven't heard about anyone new either. Where did she come from?"

"....." Zelaide's expression was hard.

"Could it be the girl you mentioned last time? Didn't you say she was human? Don't tell me you—"

"I didn't do her!" Zelaide roared. "I won't do that kinda thing with her... I can't."

"So that's it. You met your mate. How's it been? Life changing, right?"

"...!"

"Oh wow, I've never seen you blush before. This is fun."

"Shut up!"

"Hahaha! You don't usually snap either."

Manuela was unfazed by Zelaide's blustering that typically caused adult men to quake in their boots. Age difference played a big part in her calm handling of the younger Beast Blood.

"...But why didn't you go through with it? Is she unwilling to accept you as her mate? Human women are finicky."

Zelaide winced away from his fellow Beast Blood's frank questioning.

But he came to see Manuela today because he wanted to consult her about these things. Putting up with her teasing was worth the information. This was a particularly touchy subject for male Beast Bloods.

"I don't wanna hurt her..." he admitted.

"Hurt her? Where'd you get that idea? Did the girl cruelly reject you, saying she never asked for a beast like you to be in her life? And then that pissed you off so bad you're afraid you'll attack her...?"

"Don't even joke 'bout that! I'll slaughter anybody who tries to

hurt her, even if that's me!"

Beast Blood men protected their mate's with their very life. Their whole world revolved around that woman.

"Do you hear yourself? Sounds like she's your mate to me." Manuela smiled with the wisdom of an older woman. The young Beast Blood glared at her obnoxious confidence.

"Mate... What the heck is a mate? Why does having one make me so miserable?"

"Misery is what lets you know they're your mate. You want to embrace them and be embraced. You want to love them and be loved. And you want to devote your whole being to them," Manuela explained to the youngster using human words. She believed that was the best way to impart this knowledge to Zelaide.

"...Do ya know it the moment you meet?"

"If only. Stuff like that only happens in the convenient love stories humans write. It's not that easy for us to figure out. But there's this sense that you can't forget the other person no matter how hard you try. You'll experience magnetic attraction to them. You become extra sensitive to their voice and smell in ways that stimulate your desire. By the time you realize it, you won't want to be apart from them and have this unbearable desire to make them yours..." Tears glistened in Manuela's eyes as she spoke. "At least that's what my deceased mate said about the time he met me."

Talking about it reminded her of the mate she lost. But Zelaide related to the information she imparted.

"It wasn't that way for you?" she asked.

"...I don't know. I just wanna protect her. I don't wanna hurt her."

"That's why you should protect her so she doesn't get hurt. Why do you feel so conflicted?"

"Because I could become the very thing that hurts her," Zelaide crisply concluded.

"How?"

"She and I are completely different sizes to start. Not to mention she seems to have barely any experience. Women go through a lot, right? Like...pain and fear..."

"Ah, that's your concern..." Manuela examined the young Beast Blood in front of her. *Is that what's bothering him?* She finally understood what Zelaide was struggling with.

He contacted her because he had wanted advice only she could

give him.

“Doesn’t help that she’s a classy lady from upper society. She’s the type who shouldn’t have anythin’ to do with a scoundrel like me.”

“You have much to learn, young one... Do you honestly think we can give up on our mates with human reasoning? We’re Beast Bloods. Tell me the current situation you’re in.”

Zelaide silently pondered Manuela’s suggestion before reluctantly recounting the situation.

“I first met her when she was about to be violated by Vermis scum. She resolutely chose to take her own life rather than be sullied by their hands. Her eyes in that moment were more beautiful than anythin’ I’ve ever seen. I lost sight of everything else. I ended up savin’ her, which was the start of everything. For whatever reason she’s been hanging ’round me since... Buncha stuff happened that got me hired as her bodyguard by a family member.”

“And you started thinking she’s your mate while all this was going on, right?” Manuela interjected.

“I don’t know. Just watchin’ her made me hungry. Then she caught me scarfing down raw meat in the dark, but she said it doesn’t bother her.”

“Oh? Sounds like a good match then. Most prissy human ladies would be disgusted.”

“But now meat isn’t enough to...satisfy me,” Zelaide confessed, feeling pathetic. “She always gives off this sweet smell... So I constantly have to hold my breath or stand upwind. But the cravings are too much to ignore.”

“Those are normal desires for a Beast Blood male. Why don’t you get with her if she’s willing? She sounds like a fine mate.”

“We almost went that far yesterday. The blood went to my head, and I got so excited I wasn’t thinking straight... But then somethin’ interrupted us, and I came back to my senses.”

“Wow! Are you made of self-control?”

“I have to control myself. I’m too different from her... I don’t wanna hurt her. I’ve already experienced how crazy it makes me when I smell her blood.”

“Silly boy. Is that what’s got you worried? Women are sturdier than you think. They’re better at enduring pain than men. We’re made to give birth to children after all. Her first time with you might be a little painful, but she’ll get over it fast. Especially if she

loves you. Has she told you how she feels yet?"

"...She has," the young Beast Blood quietly affirmed. If the riders and senator from yesterday saw him now, they'd never believe he was the same monster who took them down. He was that downtrodden.

"Zelaide," Manuela said with a patient smile. "Listen to me carefully. You have lived alone since your parents died when you were still a pup. You might not have gotten deeply involved with humans, but you were raised among them. That's why you unconsciously follow their rules and morals."

"What does that mean?" Zelaide leaned closer, curiosity piqued.

"We Beast Bloods mature slower than humans. Our outward appearance may look like an adult human, but our minds remain in adolescence for much longer. You're a pure Beast Blood, but you've never had anyone teach you what that means."

"Are you sayin' I'm still a punk brat?"

"You're a genuine punk whether I say it or not. Your strong cravings come from what's commonly referred to by humans as teenage hormones. I'm amazed you've held back this long. It's probably those human rules fostered in you that made it possible... For better or worse."

"....."

"But you can't keep that up now that you've met your mate. Follow your Beast Blood instincts and devote yourself to her before someone else does. That's all there is to it."

"Devote myself..."

"That's right. Put your life on the line to protect your woman... Didn't you come to see me because you wanted someone to tell you that?" Manuela pointed out, lightly tapping him on the cheek.

"I get it now...Manuela. I'll do that."

"Good. You do that." Manuela smiled like an affectionate mother.

"...I won't come here again," Zelaide informed the woman who had supported him since he'd lost his parents. He had never loved her romantically, but she was an important person in his life who he could talk to and who taught him self-control and how to act as a Beast Blood male.

"That's for the best. Though I hope you'll occasionally meet up

with my boy.”

“I will.”

“Go earn your place by her side. A Beast Blood’s mate means more to us than our own lives.”

“...I know that now.”

“Let me give you one last kiss. You’re now another son to me.” Manuela pecked Zelaide on the forehead when he obediently bent down. “Stay well. Become a great man.”

“Yeah...thanks.”

They shared a small smile. That was their farewell.

They were able to put an end to their relationship without any tears or regrets. But they would forever be connected by the common thread they shared as fellow Beast Bloods.

Euphemia was the place where Zelaide should return. She had become his mate.

Manuela watched the young Beast Blood depart with motherly affection. Her instincts as an older Beast Blood female were content; the child would soon become a man and have progeny of his own. She was proud of him.



ANOTHER summer day quickly passed. The sky was high.

On this particular morning there wasn’t a cloud in sight. The green landscape turned a shade darker after being washed by the rain. The mild winds brought humidity.

“Good morning. Sorry I fell asleep right away last—What’s wrong?” Euphemia saw Zelaide glaring at his IHT in the kitchen as she came down the stairs.

Did he get bad news from Pal?

Euphemia knew Palmina contacted Zelaide every morning. She didn’t know what the agent’s messages said, but she assumed they were about more than just work. Zelaide was always so indifferent about it that Euphemia didn’t ask.

Two days ago, Euphemia had seduced Zelaide hoping it would lead to more. Her plan ended up backfiring and leaving them stuck in the same tense rut of bodyguard and client.

At least I figured out that he’s attracted to me and not disgusted. But he also didn’t try to have sex with me or say he loves me. I get that

we were interrupted halfway through, but there was plenty of time before the alarm went off. I still don't know how he really feels.

After daybreak, Euphemia threw herself into her work to drown her sorrows. When Zelaide returned from Gothic City that evening to pick her up, she pretended to be her cheerful self on the way home.

This was her first morning back at home with him.

Zelaide didn't seem like himself. Anger radiated from him in waves.

"Zel...?"

What's wrong? He seems furious.

The Beast Blood trembled, the IHT bending as his big hands crushed the sides. She had never seen him this angry before.

Is it not from Pal?

"...illed..."

Fangs gleamed from his downturned lips.

"What?"

"Manuela was killed..." Zelaide growled as if the words were ripped from his gut.

"Manuela? Who is that?"

"...A Beast Blood woman I know. I saw her yesterday afternoon. She was killed that same day. They discovered her body this morning."

Euphemia rushed to figure out what was going on with her drowsy brain.

Zelaide had picked her up from the laboratory just after dusk yesterday. The day's activities left her so exhausted, she fell asleep as soon as she got in his car and didn't even remember when they got home. Her plans to talk with him about their relationship had been ruined by fatigue.

Zelaide likely carried her to bed. She woke up once in the middle of the night, but he wasn't downstairs when she went to the kitchen for water. But he never left her alone at night, so he had to have been somewhere on the property. She heard Topsy whimper outside while she rummaged through the fridge for food, which likely meant Zelaide was on the roof.

In that case, he could have only met with Manuela during the afternoon when he went to the city without Euphemia. She didn't know what his business was with the other woman, but if the anger and sadness she sensed from him was anything to go by, she was

someone important to him.

Is Manuela his mate...?

Zelaide glared at the picture displayed on the IHT screen, his teal eyes glowing. Euphemia followed his gaze down and promptly turned her head away.

“...Ugh.”

She only glimpsed the picture for a second, but that was enough to tell the woman was brutally murdered. The screen was a sea of blood, the body eviscerated.

“Horrible...”

Euphemia stared at Zelaide’s back. He trembled with anger.

“I... It’s my fault...” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“Your fault? Why?”

“Because I went to see her... She was killed to get back at me... All because I just saw her... She has a son!”

Zelaide’s claws dug into the IHT, cracking the screen. Intense rage and sorrow seethed in his eyes. Seeing him express such raw emotion for the first time led Euphemia to conclude, *Oh...I see. Zel loved this person. Loved this woman who was a Beast Blood just like him...*

“Was she your mate, Zel...?”

“...Manuela was a good person.” He raised his eyes from the screen, but neither confirmed nor denied her question. “A really good person,” he repeated.

Zelaide’s own stupidity made him sick. *I shouldn’t have gone anywhere when I know they’re watchin’ me.*

He never thought they’d go this far just because he briefly stopped by a filthy apartment in the middle of the day. Manuela was a strong Beast Blood; she could hold her own against normal humans. Zelaide always took precautions against Infernum, but they had taken their cunning and hatred a step further than usual and killed her.

Of course they killed her to intimidate and spite Zelaide.

They’re finally tryin’ to seriously smoke me out... Not just me... Euphemia too. There’s no room for doubt now.

The same Infernum trying to eradicate Zelaide was colluding with Mayor Saionji’s enemies to bury them both. Their enemies were after different things, which meant even if they weren’t going to kill Euphemia like they had Manuela, they meant to see her

ruined to the extent her older sister Erica could never again be seen in public, much less run for politics.

Meanwhile, they were composing a surefire scenario that would send the Beast Blood Zelaide to certain death.

Euphemia. Zelaide stared into those large emerald gems that anxiously looked up at him. A hot lump formed deep inside him. *This woman is...my mate. But she probably doesn't know that she's become a Beast Blood's mate. What'll she think if she knew? What did she tell me the other night?*

"Being your friend is a big fat lie! A lie I told to protect my hurt pride. I'm in love with you!" Euphemia's words echoed in his head.

Love? What does it mean to love?

As a Beast Blood, Zelaide was incapable of fully comprehending human emotion. He could tell she was fond of him. But he feared fondness was a completely different kind of emotion from the ardor and fixation Beast Blood's felt for their mates.

"Did you love her, Zel? The woman who died," Euphemia asked, her lips trembling.

"Love?"

Do I love her? Aah, is that how humans express it?

Manuela had said the same thing to him yesterday.

"You want to love them and be loved. And you want to devote your whole being to them."

Zelaide turned those words over and over in his mind.

Until recently, love was a distant concept. A word that had nothing to do with him could not move his heart. The swell that began like ripples on a calm lake now raged like a storm, eating away at his composure. What was love for a human? Did it share the devotion, the dedication, and the obsession wrapped up in the Beast Blood concept of mates?

"Zel?"

Euphemia's luxurious golden locks were tied back in a tight bun for work and nonprescription glasses adorned her unpowdered face.

She wore a simple white blouse and plain black slacks. This was her desperate attempt to look intelligent by concealing her beauty, even though her intelligence had nothing to do with looks. Real planning about how to eradicate the addictive drug Nightz from this world through scientific means filled her head. This strange woman who embodied purity and innocence, yet possessed

an unshakeable will was his mate.

I love you... If only I could tell her that.

"I don't know love. Don't need it."

The complete opposite words left Zelaide's lips instead.

I can't tell her the truth. She'll be next after Manuela if the enemy finds out I have special feelings for her.

The truth would also deal a heavy blow to Erica's campaign and tear the municipal government apart. He couldn't offer better ammunition to his enemies if he tried.

The situation was already dangerous enough as it was.

"But Manuela—"

"I told ya I frequent a prostitute," Zelaide spoke over her. "I was one of Manuela's clients. She occasionally looked after my needs."

"Is that what you went to see her for yesterday? To satisfy your needs?" Euphemia couldn't keep the accusatory tone out of her voice.

Instead of making love to me? You did it with that woman?

"Not yesterday. I dropped off a motorcycle and came straight back home," Zelaide answered frankly, crushing Euphemia's doubts. If he had to lie about his feelings, the least he could do was be as honest as he could about everything else. "She's a tough Beast Blood woman. She became a prostitute to raise the kid she had with her mate before he died. She was a good person. There was no reason to kill her," he said between clenched teeth.

"Did they...kill that person to threaten you, Zelaide?"

"Probably."

"Then it's got something to do with me too."

"...Yeah."

"Wait a few minutes." Euphemia dashed upstairs and came back down ten minutes later. "Zel, my sister said she'll make time for us tonight."

"Why?"

"I wish we could go sooner, but Erica has meetings and I can't take time off work... I also need time to look into some things."

Zelaide panicked. Euphemia was plotting something and that couldn't be anything good. "Stop right there. You're still going to work after hearing 'bout this? It's not safe inside the lab either, y'know?"

"I'm going. The enemy won't show their true colors if I sit at

home twiddling my thumbs. So I'll try to lure out the traitor by prancing around like my head is stuck in the clouds. Who knew the day would come when my stupid-looking face could actually come in handy? Let's take down Manuela's enemy together!" Euphemia declared, too stubborn to sit around when there was work to be done.

†††

"...I understand the situation, Euphemia. Zelaide, the police report states that the prostitute Manuela was killed right after you left." Erica swiped away the image on her large IHT screen and faced the Beast Blood.

Erica realized the gravity of the situation after Euphemia's foreboding call that morning and promptly contacted the precinct. Every minute of Erica's day was scheduled. With the recent increase in Nightz-related crimes, the media had become more critical of her by the day, and the mayor had to stay a step ahead of everyone in order to maintain her position.

Her plate was full of approving new regulations and detailed policy revisions, but she managed to make time to hear her sister out before her next meeting.

"...I knew it," Zelaide growled.

"She was killed in a one-story apartment she rented out for work in Out Circle's District G. Considering the location and what the place was used for, only people who had business with her entered that room," Erica said, reading off the facts of the investigation. "Since she ran a private business, there aren't any coworkers who frequent the building either. Her only son lives elsewhere..."

"....."

"According to the forensics, she resisted her attackers to the bitter end. The room was destroyed and blood splatter is all over the ceiling and walls... Mia, leave the room if you don't feel well," Erica instructed after glancing at her sister.

"...No, I'm fine. I'll listen to the rest of the report," Euphemia insisted, acting strong despite her stark-white face.

Erica said nothing more on the matter and pointed to the data on the screen. "That apartment complex is used by multiple

prostitutes to service their clients at night. It's mostly empty during the day. That's why no one came to check on her despite the noise. But a drunkard who passed in front of the room just past noon said he heard loud bangs coming from inside. From that, we can deduce that was the time of the crime. The body happened to be found by the apartment manager who came by to pick up rent this morning."

"I left at noon. The timing adds up."

"The cause of death is blood loss. More details will come out with the autopsy results... They will perform a necropsy, so we won't know for sure until then. Do you know why she was killed?"

"Because I went to see her... They must've thought she was my mistress... I heard the news first thing this morning from an acquaintance. Has it already leaked to the media?"

"The police are on the case. They have their own information network, so it's probably out there. But it's possible they haven't confirmed the victim is a Beast Blood woman. Either way, it will be on the news by the end of the day."

"...Any other information?"

"I can't tell if it's connected, but there was a tip that an unfamiliar man had been loitering around the area since last week. Strange men are a dime a dozen in that district, but the tip giver said he seemed too well-dressed to be a client. Place being what it is, it's hard to say if that man's target was the victim or something else entirely. My people are looking into it."

"I'll ask around too. That said, Mayor Saionji..."

"What is it?"

"Sorry to say this now, but don't you think it's best if I stop hanging 'round your sister? Manuela ended up like that just after talkin' to me..."

"No!" Euphemia shouted over him, breaking her patient silence.

Erica and Zelaide stared at her.

"Mia..."

"Zel wasn't with that woman when she was killed! If he had been there, she wouldn't have died! Besides, the enemy already knows I'm connected to Zel. And we're the ones who roped him into this, asking him to protect me! Separating us now will only make it more dangerous for me! I'm a target, too!"

"Yumi... That's why you should stay here..."

"No. I won't be able to continue my research on the Mongolian

gerbils! I don't want to let the opportunity Director Burhardt gave me go to waste! He gave me a ton of advice just today, too. I need to continue my research!"

"Your life matters more," Zel argued.

"You'll protect me, won't you, Zel? It'll be less dangerous if we stay together all the time. Erica can make it so you can freely enter the lab—"

"That will just make it easier for them to target you both at the same time," Erica calmly pointed out. "You should listen to his professional advice and stay—"

"I absolutely refuse!" Euphemia shot down Erica as well. "They'll target us both? Sounds perfect to me! Then we will know who's after us and who they're working with in one go. I doubt they'll come at us with heavy firepower. Zel can stick close to me and then I can get in touch with Wei for police assistance... I'll become bait. Let's drag out those cowardly scumbags who kill innocent people on a whim."

"But—"

"Zel! You said you'll protect me. Don't abandon me now! Please, stay with me!"

Euphemia was desperate. Her research team had just started to get somewhere, she couldn't give everything up after coming this far. Being ripped apart from Zelaide was just as unbearable.

"I don't want to run or hide! I'll fight back in my own way! Please let me do this, Erica—no, Mayor Saionji. Your little sister won't flee in terror over this!" Euphemia declared with both feet planted firmly on the ground and her head held high.

†Chapter 2: Caged Wolf†

“ZELAIDE Silvergray!”

Six fully armed Guardians were waiting outside when Euphemia and Zelaide exited the mayor’s private residential building.

Guardians were a Special Forces unit made up of citizens who had undergone specialized military training. It was a separate entity from the police and functioned more as a city’s army.

The city mayor was Commander in Chief and the executive with the final say in all military matters, but actual command of Guardian operations was conducted by the Guardian Commander appointed by the mayor. Direct supervision and management of the Guardians was currently handled by the influential Senator Ingalls and wealthy businessman Haydn. Ingalls, in particular, had a career as a Guardian Commander in his younger years, and was elected with popular support to oversee operations during his current senatorial term.

About 2,000 active-duty Guardians served Gothic City. Their primary function was to cooperate with police and ensure the safety of citizens when the danger became too great for police to handle. Guardians were the elite force entrusted with spearheading operations and taking the vanguard against Muta and invasions both planetary and interstellar.

Six of those elite Guardians had Zelaide and Euphemia surrounded.

“State your business,” Zelaide demanded in a low growl, undeterred by the heavily armed men.

He positioned Euphemia behind him, but the willful scientist poked her head around his broad back to get a better look at what was happening.



"I'm Andre Jossel, Captain of the 3rd Special Forces Group with Gothic City's Guardians. Zelaide Silvergray, you are a suspect in the murder of the prostitute Manuela. Do not resist and come with us to Police Headquarters."

"What did you just say?!"

It wasn't the Beast Blood who shouted, but the woman fidgeting behind him.

"What in the colonies are you talking about? Zel just finished speaking with the mayor about the...Manuela case!" Euphemia argued, unsure of how to best explain the conversation they had with Erica. Zelaide hadn't done anything wrong. She needed to prove that.

"Yumi... Don't interfere," Zelaide warned, calmer than ever. Not even a shred of emotion glimmered in his teal eyes.

"But it's the truth! Why are you being suspected of murder?"

"Yelling at 'em isn't gonna help my case, right? I'll be fine. Just stay out of it." Zelaide looked over his shoulder at her. His tone was brusquer than usual, but he wasn't angry or emotional. Euphemia wisely chose to bite her tongue. He turned back to the nervous Guardians. "What's your basis for the charges?"

"The DNA sample collected from the fluids left in the victim's body at the scene of the crime matched with the blood sample you submitted for your Hunter registration," Captain Jossel explained with cool indifference.

Anyone who worked as a Hunter, whether they were Beast Blood or Human, was subject to various legal regulations since they often acted independent from the planet's governing bodies while packing enough heat to take down a small army.

Killing Muta required the use of high caliber lethal firearms and explosives, which were a threat to normal citizens and police if used wrong. Regulations were strict for all Hunters, but they were especially severe for Beast Bloods who weren't registered citizens. Various biometric identification data including fingerprints, voiceprints, blood samples, iris pattern registration, and the works had to be provided when registering as a Hunter.

Collecting this data was a deterrent against elite Hunters becoming violent criminals. Many Beast Blood men became Hunters. It didn't require them to blend into human society like other occupations. The Hunter occupation was also established with

Beast Bloods in mind as a way for them to vent their bloodlust, while they effectively took down Mutas and dangerous criminals the police rather not deal with.

“My fluids were found at Manuela’s place? Which? Sweat? Spit?” Zelaide asked.

“Drop the act. It’s a prostitute’s workplace. It’s a given it’s semen. All over her genitalia.”

The younger Guardians snickered. Zelaide still didn’t lose his cool.

“Impossible. I just finished reporting to the mayor that I met up with Manuela, but I didn’t sleep with a woman in that room.”

“But your DNA was collected from the crime scene. It came up as a 99.997 percent match with Zelaide Silvergray in the police databank. That’s you. That’s why we’re here to arrest *you*. We’re here on official orders. See for yourself.”

Jossel brought up an image on the simple IHT attached to his armplate. A complex string of numbers popped up. The blue glowing code number and Gothic City’s official crest coldly illuminated Zelaide’s face. Beneath the code was the reason for Zelaide’s arrest and the Chief of Police’s signature.

“Like the police of a bygone era used to say, we have a warrant for your arrest,” Jossel stated dispassionately.

“That can’t be! Please wait a minute. I’ll go ask my sister. I just came out of her office. She won’t stand for this unfair arrest!”

“Sister? Office?” Jossel and the Guardians eyed Euphemia suspiciously.

She spun around to march back into the building she had just left and bumped into the large man standing directly behind her.

“I can’t recommend that, young lady.”

“Mister Ingalls!”

“Don’t drag Mayor Saionji into this. You will only hurt your sister’s reputation. This is an official, legal warrant for arrest. Think logically. It’s the mayor who holds ultimate responsibility for these orders.”

It was Harry Ingalls, one of the next mayoral candidates who had a heated debate with Erica during the TV debate just recently.

“The official report should be arriving at Mayor Saionji’s desk right about now,” Ingalls said with a hard expression. “She won’t act once she knows the facts. The grounds for arresting this Beast Blood are justified. Knowing her, she will tell the authorities to

thoroughly investigate it, but she won't drop the warrant just because her little sister asks."

"But she just—"

"Situations change just like the wind. If this Beast Blood is telling the truth, the investigation will be drawn out before his sentence is handed down. All you can do is wait like a good girl under your sister's protection. You trust him, don't you? You should be able to wait if you do."

"If he's deserving of trust that is." Senator Ziggurat Haydn, Erica and Ingalls's political rival, appeared from the right door that opened without a sound. He wore a custom-tailored black suit and showed no emotion on his bony face. "I am also privy to police intelligence. I just read the report. According to it, this Beast Blood frequented that prostitute multiple times in the past. You understand what that means, I hope, Lady Euphemia."

"I do. But their relationship was a consensual business transaction, right?"

"It seems that this Beast Blood always paid the murdered woman large sums of cash per a visit. Large sums exceeding market price—as if he was being blackmailed into it. Perhaps she had some dirt on him?" Haydn's pale eyes icily turned to Zelaide.

"She did not," Euphemia said for him. "Zel—Zelaide was enraged over Manuela's murder..."

"Enraged, huh? Then why did he come to City Hall? To seek shelter from arrest?"

"Absolutely not! We have good reason for being here."

"Can you explain what that is, Lady Euphemia?" Haydn coaxed in a velvety voice.

Zelaide stayed perfectly still, his features schooled into a mirror of calm. The Guardians surrounding them and Ingalls watched over their conversation without interfering.

"Because..." Euphemia trailed off. Telling her sister's political enemies that her life was being threatened would only put Erica in a worse position. Only three days had passed since they last found her under attack by the motorcycle gang in the Wilds. That gang was definitely a part of Infernum, the anti-Beast Blood terrorist group.

"Because he is cooperating in an investigation," she settled for. That was the best excuse she could come up with.

"He can defend himself at the station. It's not a good idea to

argue out here. I understand how you must feel, but please cooperate,” Ingalls advised Euphemia, his voice stern.

“That’s not fair!”

“It’s fine, Yumi.” Zelaide maneuvered in front of her. The surrounding Guardians instantly tensed and stood protectively in front of the mayoral candidates. But Zelaide continued to take a calm stance and simply moved his eyes over the men as if he was bored with them. “He’s right. I should go.”

“Zel! How could you say that?! This is clearly a trap! They framed you. Once they have you locked up they won’t let you back out!” Euphemia shouted, not caring how it made her look.

Contrary to her emotional outcry, the Beast Blood kept his composure.

“So be it then. You stay here. Don’t even set foot outside City Hall!” he commanded with a frighteningly stern face. Zelaide was dead serious. He was serious about letting them capture him.

“I don’t want that. I’ll fight. I’ll fight them all!”

“Don’t!”

The mood became so tense the air seemed to freeze over. Everyone watching flinched from the intensity of that single word. Zelaide’s normally low, rumbling voice echoed powerfully off the concrete walls.

“Don’t...involve yourself further.”

“No! I don’t want this, Zelaide! I want to protect you!”

“Yumi...”

“Zel, didn’t you hear me say I love you? I love you! With all my heart! So I’ll fight for you!” Euphemia shouted humanity’s most sacred word, watchful eyes be damned.

Obviously the Guardians, and even Zelaide, rolled back on their heels and stared at her in surprise.

“Love...you love me? Aah...is that it? Is that what it means?” Zelaide nodded with a look that seemed to say he finally comprehended mankind’s greatest mystery at the worst possible time. Then he faced Euphemia again. His eyes glowed even though it wasn’t dark. “I understand, Yumi,” he said, refreshed.

“Zel...?”

“Yeah, it’s okay. I get it now. Not with my head, but here.” Zelaide’s long finger pointed to his heart. “So do me a favor and back down, okay?”

“...!”

“Euphemia.”

The double doors leading inside the mayor’s residential building opened. Erica Saionji stepped through the threshold. She had changed into formal attire. Her battle started from here.

“Zelaide is correct. Keep out of this.”

“Erica—”

“Zelaide.” Erica directed her gaze toward Zelaide, completely ignoring her younger sister’s pleading voice. “You have served me well until now. You have my gratitude for protecting my sister with your life. However, it appears things have drastically changed. I will take over protecting Euphemia now. I swear it. Please do what you must. I will watch over how things play out with impartiality. I may directly hand down judgment if the need arises.”

Hand down judgment on Zelaide or his enemies?

Erica didn’t know which she meant when she said it either.

“I’d appreciate that...” Zelaide responded, satisfied despite the situation being against him.

Erica said nothing about the allegations against Zelaide and he didn’t touch on the topic either. Their eyes only met for a brief moment, but it was enough for them to both understand where the other stood and decide to move toward what they each needed to accomplish.

“Zel!”

“I’m going. Be good, Yumi.” Zelaide said nothing more and smiled with just a slight curve of his lips. Then he turned his back on Euphemia to leave with the Guardians flanking him. They didn’t dare touch him or get too close.

“I promise I’ll do something about this! I won’t give up on you!”

He merely raised one hand in the air, his back still turned to her and her heartrending cry. Then he disappeared around the corner of the building with the Guardians blocking his leather-clad back from view.

Euphemia turned on her sister. “I’m disappointed in you, Erica! We’re the ones who dragged Zel into our problems. He’s the victim here!”

“Be quiet. Whining about it won’t solve the problem. Know your place.”

Euphemia gasped.

“Take Euphemia into my residence,” Erica said to the aides

who had followed her out. "Give her one of the guest rooms and keep her under surveillance."

"No! I refuse to go! Let go of me! Why won't you listen to me, Erica?!"

"Calm down first if you want me to hear you out."

Cheeks flushed molten red, Euphemia struggled against the two aides who grabbed her by the arms.

Erica watched them secure her before shooting a chilling look at Ingalls and Haydn, who was soundlessly clapping his hands. "I sincerely apologize for the constant trouble my sister has been causing you these past few days. I'm ashamed for not having taught her better."

"Don't be. I heard your sister is a brilliant scientist. That was why I thought she would understand when I told her to stay out of this problem right now. The investigation will be intense. But he won't be treated unjustly because he is a Beast Blood. I don't like things to be unfair." Ingalls sympathized with Erica and her harsh approach on family.

Haydn, however, watched Euphemia struggling with deadened eyes. "A word of advice to the young lady, if I may. You are still young and superficial in your thinking. I fully understand why you are attracted to rare things that look pretty. Your love confession was very touching. But your passion will burn out with the next thing that catches your eye."

Haydn's voice held a velvety quality. But Euphemia found his coaxing far more disgusting than Ingalls's parental scolding. He was treating her like a girl who was in love with the idea of being in love.

"You're wr—"

"Indeed, Senator Haydn. You are absolutely right," Erica said over Euphemia.

"Erica! I meant what I said! I lo—"

"Bring Euphemia inside already!"

The aides rushed to obey Erica's unusually dour command by dragging Euphemia through the double doors into the building. They kicked the doors shut behind them. The three mayoral candidates were left alone outside.

"Your little sister is a very entertaining young lady, if you don't mind me saying so, Mayor Saionji. Though going by that behavior, she's guaranteed to do something rash to save that Beast

Blood. Imprudently shouting her love for him is not something to be praised...”

“I’m sorry, Mister Haydn,” Erica apologized like a businesswoman. “Giving her everything she ever wanted until now has made her into a selfish young woman. I’m responsible for that. Ever since she was a little girl she has had a thing for rarities and a bad habit of wanting things she can’t have even though she easily tires of them once she obtains it... After what happened the other day, I am going to keep her close for a while until she starts thinking straight again.”

“That’s a good idea. In that case, why not send her to my villa? It’s located in Romanesque City. It’s far enough that she can lay low until her lingering attachment for the beast dies out. There’s a research facility nearby that she would like. If you like, I can contact them and arrange for them to prepare a lab for her research. The rest of the world sees you, me, and Ingalls as political adversaries, and while that is true on many fronts, we are also comrades who care about the future of this city. Won’t entrusting your immediate family to me be a way of showing how open-minded you are?” Haydn suggested.

“You certainly have a different way of looking at things, Mister Haydn. Thank you for your generous offer. I would love to take you up on it, but for now I am going to keep her under close surveillance and reeducate her on proper behavior. She is my family, even if she doesn’t seem like it.”

“Is that so? Very well. Then be sure to take extra precautions around her.” Haydn bowed elegantly and left, leaving Erica scowling in his wake. Ingalls pat her once on the shoulder and left as well.

Only Euphemia’s loud curses continued to echo from beyond the double doors.

†††

SOMEONE’S coming, Zelaide thought from where he lay on a simple, hard bed. He didn’t need to sit up to sense them.

The isolation cell was separated from the interrogation room next door by one-way mirrors, but Zelaide’s heightened senses alerted him to activity outside the walls. Someone was coming

outside the usual interrogation time, but he didn't care since they were probably only coming to hound him about a murder he didn't commit or to beat him up for the heck of it.

I don't give a damn what they want.

Zelaide did his best to bury his thoughts since being stuffed in this cell. He was actually grateful for their harsh, inhumane treatment. After all, he didn't have to think while they hit him. His heart bled whenever his thoughts went to Manuela and Euphemia. It was only when the police punched and kicked him that he could briefly forget his inability to protect the women close to him.

Countless bruises and welts marred his body where they relentlessly beat him. Beast Bloods were tough, but they still felt pain and got injured when beaten. They could just take a harder beating than humans and they healed much faster.

Like being bitten by fleas.

Zelaide lifted only his head to look down at the contusions on his abdomen and arms. His superior regeneration had erased the black and blue marks inflicted just yesterday. He loathed how unbreakable he was. That was yet another thing that set him apart from humanity. As he vacantly stared at his recovering bruises, the room dimmed, making it possible to see through the one-way mirror on his side. At the same time, a panel with a speaker and several switches opened near the mirror.

Today marked the fourth day since his arrest.

"Pardon the intrusion." A young man with a solid, muscular build entered the room.

He wore casual clothes and didn't seem to be an interrogator. He had spiked, short black hair. Seemingly honest and upright eyes looked Zelaide over with great curiosity. It was a look humans had given him since he was a boy.

But unlike the people whose faces twisted with discrimination, this young man was open-minded and immediately smiled when he noticed Zelaide was watching him.

"Yo, Beast Blood." The young man cheerfully raised his right hand in greeting. Zelaide had absolutely no interest in him, but sat up in bed to see where this was going. "They've been pounding you hard, huh? But you haven't fought back like they expected. Surprising!"

"....."

"Then again, it won't get you anywhere if you go wild in there.

Not even a Beast Blood can break down these walls,” the young man said as he sat on the chair facing the one-way mirror. “I’m Wei Lin-jie. Just your run-of-the-mill cop. Ever hear about me from Mia? Whoa.” Wei nearly jumped out of his chair. “That’s a killer look you’re giving me. Scary.”

The moment he mentioned Euphemia’s nickname the Beast Blood glared at him with glowing eyes.

“Uncle, uncle! Douse the bloodlust, would ya? It’s worse than I was told.”

“Who are you?” Zelaide snarled. That wasn’t a question but a demand.

The man called himself a cop, but Zelaide didn’t recognize his face. He didn’t look like any of the cops who sat in on the police brutality conducted under the pretense of “questioning”. But maybe he was there and just didn’t draw Zelaide’s attention. His memory was foggy because of the beating he took chained to the wall. To Zelaide, low-ranking, grunt officers who wore the same uniforms and couldn’t be told apart weren’t much different from Euphemia’s pet gerbils.

“Do you have a bad memory? Or did they hit you so hard it made you stupid? I told you, I’m Wei, a cop. And I’m also a friend of Mia’s from university. I’m captain of the officers who joined at the same time as me—ah, never mind. I doubt you care.”

“And? What do you want from me? They’ve already questioned the living daylights outta me. How many times do I have to repeat myself for ya to go away?”

“C’mon, don’t send me away yet. Looks like they’re really giving you a hard time though. Questioning doesn’t usually involve beatings. Cops are supposed to be on the side of the citizens. But you aren’t a citizen.”

“So I’m treated like a punchin’ bag because I’m not a citizen? The Guardians were gentlemen compared to you cops.”

“Probably are. They’re an elite squad. They don’t waste their time questioning and investigating people. I’m not one of them, but there are many police officers who hate them. But let’s get back to the point. You’re likely getting the third-degree because someone up high ordered it. You sure ruffled some big shot’s feathers. Any idea who?”

“I’ve ruffled plenty of feathers. I’m surprised the whole coop hasn’t come after me yet.”

"I bet. With a face like that, every man's gonna have a bone to pick with you." Wei observed the silver-haired man who looked sexy even to a straight guy.

"Come back another time if you're here to screw around."

"I don't got that kinda time. And let me be clear, I didn't just suddenly decide to drop by and see you today. I've been involved since day one. You probably didn't know it, but Mia came asking for info on you about a month ago. That's why I was surprised when I overheard they arrested you. Weren't you Mia's bodyguard?"

"Don't call her *Mia*," Zelaide snarled. Hearing Wei call Euphemia by the nickname her friends used annoyed him to no end.

"...Wow, you're a royal pain in the ass. You got the hots for Mia or something?"

"I don't got the *hots*. She's just a client."

Zelaide curtly denied it, but Wei looked at him through narrowed eyes and frowned. The young man didn't look convinced, but even then he had this charming allure.

Euphemia trusts this man?

At any rate, he didn't seem especially frightened of Zelaide just because he was a Beast Blood.

"Uh-huh. She outright turned me down in the past," Wei confessed with a sullen edge to his voice.

"Heh. Sucks for you."

"Shut up. I won't tell you about Mia if you keep talking smack."

The Beast Blood's shoulders lurched forward. "Yumi... You met up with Euphemia?"

"Yeah, yesterday. I nearly wet myself when I was suddenly called into City Hall. She's currently being confined to a room deep inside that labyrinth of a government building. She was a crying mess. That was my first time seeing Mia cry in the six years I've known her."

"She...was crying..."

Zelaide felt like his heart was being torn to shreds. It was his first time experiencing heartache imagining someone crying out of earshot.

She cried... Don't cry over a beast like me, Yumi.

"I got lucky."

"What the hell?!"

“Dang! Don’t turn rabid on me! Put those fangs away before you hurt someone! You look like a snarling dog. But I’m jealous you look so cool even when you’re scowling. Makes sense why you made everyone’s dream girl fall for you—uh, right, that’s not the point. Anyway, I didn’t do anything to her. I’m not the kinda bastard who takes advantage of a crying woman.”

“.....”

“I’m serious! She kept saying your name the entire time she was crying, you know? Imagine the girl you crushed on crying into your chest calling for another guy! It’s hell.”

Wei was seriously trying to pacify the Beast Blood who had half-risen off the bed. With the bloodlust he was giving off, Wei was afraid the other man would smash through the glass and choke him to death.

“Argh! Fine! I’ll admit it, as much as I hate to! Mia is crazy about you! She pleaded with me to help you, her pretty big green eyes full of tears. She insisted ‘Zel’s a nice guy. He looks and acts scary, but he’d never hurt a lady. He’s been set up!’ She went on and on like that.”

“...Then she cried?”

“Yeah. She tried to act tough at first, throwing out all sorts of difficult legalese such as it’s a human rights violation and there being a lack of evidence. Then she suddenly broke down crying when I asked if she loved you. Honestly, it threw me for a loop. By the end, the most beautiful woman I know was on her knees, weeping like a child. That was enough to do me in.”

Dammit to hell! Feels like somebody ripped out my heart and stepped on it! It pisses me off that she borrowed this man’s chest, but her beautiful emerald eyes wept for my sake... Zelaide gnawed his bottom lip.

“Whoa, dude. You okay there? You look like hell. You sure you aren’t hurting somewhere? Heh heh.”

You can’t deny you have the hots for her with a face like that. Wei grinned as he looked up at the robust Beast Blood.

Irked, Zelaide whipped his face to the side.

Going by appearances only, they looked like two men in their twenties joking around with each other.

“Shut your trap. Would ya get to the point? Spit it out already, unless ya just came to keep railing on my looks.”

“Yeah, good point. Don’t have much time as it is.” Wei pulled

himself together and cut to the chase. "Some big timer in the Homicide Division wants to hang you as the real culprit no matter what it takes. I'd say he's getting pressure from someone even higher up the food chain."

"I bet." Zelaide expected as much.

"There's also incontestable proof. They found your sperm all over the victim's vagina and room. I checked out the data too. It's legit evidence."

"I know. But...it was planted. I didn't have sex with Manuela."

"Okay, then can you explain why live sperm was found pouring out of the victim? Did you do a sterility test somewhere?" Wei asked about the most obvious and critical point, but it seemed to be something Zelaide needed to consider.

"...Hey, there's somethin' I need to ask you. How long can sperm survive outside the body?"

"Beats me... I can't say for Beast Bloods, but I'd venture a guess that a human's can last two to three days... Hold on, don't tell me you..." Wei's spine went rigid when he realized the implication there.

"....."

"Hey?"

"It's from that time..." Zelaide uttered in a stupor.

"What?"

"I did it two nights ago...on my own. Y'know...masturbate or whatever."

"Why?" Wei's sharp eyes widened at that completely unexpected confession.

Zelaide's nose scrunched in a disgusted frown. "Why does anyone do it? Don't make me repeat myself. Obviously I just cleaned up and tossed aside the mess. The situation was...a bit sketchy, so I forgot all 'bout it later..."

"Alrighty then. So, where'd you do it?"

"Biotechnology Research Institute. In a tiny breeding lab. The rodent breeding lab."

"You did it at Biotech?!" Wei's jaw dropped.

"That's it, isn't it? There was some damn voyeur who set up shop knowin' we'd be in that room... Dammit it all to hell!" Zelaide gritted his teeth. "Yumi said she disabled the cameras, but...even without the video footage, a high-quality bug would give away most of what happened in that room."

“Oh geez, give me a second to catch up to you, Sherlock.” Wei asked him to stop drawing conclusions so he could process the situation first. “Aagh, basically, you and Mia were alone in a room together, right? Things were getting heated enough for there to be a Peeping Tom, yeah? So why did you have to—” *masturbate*? Wei swallowed that last word.

Why would he have to do that? Especially when the girl he has the hots for is right in front of him and willing to go all the way? I mean, I’m glad he didn’t do anything with her, but wouldn’t most guys? They would, right? I’m not the only guy, right? It was the perfect opportunity.

Wei was too baffled to know what to ask next. Zelaide was lost in thought with a frightening expression.

“I get it now... The peeper snuck in to collect the leftovers after we left. Filthy bastard...”

“Hey, listen to me, damn it! Why did you masturbate?!”

“But I cleaned up after...with paper towels...”

“Colony to Beast Blood, are you listening to me?!”

“Be quiet... I knew it. There’s a sleeper agent at Biotech and very close to Euphemia. Is it a researcher? Or an Inferni disguised as one? Either way, I’ve got to skunk ‘im out!”

I bet it’s the same bastard who snuck out the Chude last time. Zelaide rose from the bed and glared down at Wei.

“It sickens me, but I need your help.”

“You suck!” Wei snapped, frustrated his question kept being ignored.

“Why?”

“Forget it! Hmph. I’m supposed to listen to a request from my crush’s crush, huh? I’m such a nice guy I’m starting to hate myself! Sheesh!”

Wei turned away. This handsome man capable of captivating people with just a glimpse of his beauty had, for reasons beyond Wei’s comprehension, turned down his dream girl’s tempting invitation. Some part of Wei could tell that the Beast Blood wasn’t lying. Call it his instincts as a cop.

“Please help Zel!”

Wei wasn’t convinced that Zelaide was innocent after hearing Euphemia out. He simply decided to hear the Beast Blood’s side of the story and go from there.

But...Wei’s honed cop instincts were sounding off all sorts of alarms. From the extreme treatment they inflicted in the name of

questioning, to the higher ups acting suspicious, to the Beast Blood's demeanor and stance—each piece added up to being more than just a simple homicide case.

There's more to it. Definitely more. This could turn out to be a thrilling case.

"Hey, what're you thinking 'bout over there?" Zelaide asked gruffly.

"All sorts of things... Oh, but I heard you. There's not much I can do, but...I'll look into it," Wei said, looking Zelaide directly in the eye.

"Thanks. I don't know who you are, but you have my gratitude."

"C'mon, dude... At least remember the name of the guy you asked for help." Wei shrugged, disappointed.

"Ah, sorry, Wanton."

"It's Wei... There's no way you have any guy friends."

†††

HUMAN and Beast Blood.

The two young men put their heads together and analyzed the situation.

"...Okay, I understand what you want now. In short, I just have to narrow down who entered the same breeding lab after you guys left before dawn, right?"

"Right. Yumi logged that she'd be stayin' overnight in the lab, so anybody who wanted to know where she was could do so easily," Zelaide explained. "The thing is, she didn't tell a soul that I was comin'. And yet somebody knew I was there. That's why I'm positive the spy's somebody who knows 'bout our circumstances and is also in a position to be near Yumi."

"Anyone stand out to you? Give me several names. Having several names to go off of is way more likely to net results than shooting in the dark." After conversing for a while, Wei had started to take everything the Beast Blood said seriously.

"The rat research team is most suspicious. If the members haven't changed, it's made up of a flirt named Sonia and a man who's all smiles named Ronaldo. They're often in the same lab together for hours on end. I'd also look into the people they're close

to. Both love to gossip. They're likely responsible for people finding out I drive Yumi there and back. We even ate together once," Zelaide said, sharing the names and traits of the people he had met.

"Aside from them, I'd suspect her bosses... I never met President Murakami, but I've had an unpleasant conversation with Laboratory Director Burhardt," he finished. "That's 'bout all I know. I'd say they're equally suspicious... Think you can look into 'em?"

"Can't say for sure until I start... There's no way a sleeper agent would get caught on the security cameras, and the institute has some strong extraterritoriality, so investigating is going to be a real pain... Might be easier if we ask someone we can trust on the inside, but..." Wei scratched his chin and puzzled his brow.

A regular police officer going in to question researchers would be a dead giveaway they were on to the spy.

"We can't ask Mia for assistance. Using anyone tied to the police won't work in our favor either. Maybe we can have one of their regular trade partners infiltrate for us..."

"You're gonna tell Yumi 'bout this, right?" Zelaide asked.

"Yeah, the gist at least. We determined where the irrefutable evidence, your sperm, came from. I have to warn her about a spy hiding among her peers too. The spy might be communicating with her under the guise of being her friend. But I..." Wei purposefully trailed off. He studied Zelaide with piercing scrutiny. The Beast Blood stared right back at him through the mirror.

"Don't fully trust me yet, right? ...I can tell."

"Don't hate me for it. Mia wept over your innocence, and I've kinda gotten a feel for your personality. You don't seem like the type to kill a woman... But my occupation is rife with the fact that *good* guys commit unbelievable crimes. Frankly, this is an extremely dangerous bridge for me to cross. I'm dead if my superiors find out."

"Good point."

"To make matters worse, public order in Gothic City has been going on the fritz over the past few days. We've been seizing Nightz left and right since last week, and the addicts have been ramping up their attacks and craziness nonstop since. The beat cops have had their hands full night and day. The only reason I was able to slip in to see you is because the station is down to a skeleton crew and they don't have time to worry about questioning. This is a confidential secret, mind you."

“.....”

“I can only see it as some big syndicate distributing more Nightz than usual as a part of a bigger scheme. Today’s my first day off in ages, but I expect them to call me back on duty at any moment.” Wei sighed.

“I get the feelin’ the guy responsible for setting me up is also involved with the explosion in Nightz-related incidents.” Zelaide turned his head, revealing his angular side profile, and lowered his gaze to the concrete floor. He had sat back down on the pathetically small bed with his legs crossed.

“Why? No offense, but I doubt distributing Nightz is needed to bring down a single Beast Blood.”

“I’m a Beast Blood—I’m constantly on the receivin’ end of baseless discrimination. But Mayor Saionji publicly professes to be an advocate for Beast Bloods. Settin’ me up as a violent criminal is the fastest way to destroy the current mayor’s platform,” Zelaide reasoned.

“Meanwhile, they’re destroyin’ public order by making everybody addicted to Nightz, inflicting a double punch into Mayor Saionji’s campaign that hinged on the promise of public safety. Does it seem that unlikely to you that they’re tryin’ to cut her legs out beneath her before the next election?”

“...Wowzers. You’ve got the brilliant reasoning of an ace detective there,” Wei said, genuinely impressed. “It sounds like a bit of a stretch to me, but...it’s a real possibility. If you’re right, then there’s a real nasty puppeteer pulling strings from the top. I wish I could discuss this with my trustworthy superiors, but they aren’t likely to believe a word from a beat cop like me. Doesn’t take a genius to guess the police commissioner is in bed with the politicians...”

“Which politician is most involved with the police?” Zelaide asked.

“There are several, but the top of the list would be senators Ingalls and Haydn. Ingalls comes from a line of farmers, but he used to serve as a cop and then as Guardian Commander in his younger years. Some of his relatives are also in comfy positions inside the police. Haydn, on the other hand, has the media in his pocket and says whatever the hell he wants without getting in trouble. They both give insane contributions and donations to the police and Guardian departments.”

"Ahh, it makes sense now. That's why they went out of their way to be there both times I was set up."

"They're both untouchables in this city. You suspect them?"

"I have good reason to suspect 'em. They always show up in front of us with impeccable timing. Maybe they're workin' together."

"Oh great," Wei groaned. "I can't do anything to them. Shouldn't we have Mayor Saionji make the first move instead? I can tell Yumi your theory and then... Do you think your hypothesis is enough to make Mayor Saionji take action?"

"She trusted me with her sister's life, so I'd say she places a moderate level of trust in me," Zelaide retorted sourly.

"Now that's amazing, especially when you and your parents don't have citizenship," Wei said out of spite. He immediately regretted his words. "Sorry. I'm not trying to discriminate against Beast Bloods. Like I said earlier, I don't think you're a bad guy. Suspecting people just comes with the territory. My issue isn't with your race...but something else."

Wei awkwardly looked away from Zelaide. "...Mia shot me down hard in the past. Like the kind of rejection you can't get back up from."

"Hmph... What 'bout it?"

"It's old history from when we attended university together. So don't give me the evil eye. I'm just jealous of you for getting *that* Mia so enthralled with you." Wei returned his gaze to Zelaide as he scratched the back of his head. "I just can't stop thinking about it. It'll distract me forever if I don't come out and ask you!"

"...Ask me what?" The Beast Blood lounged on the bed, keeping only his eyes turned toward him. He was clearly put off by Wei's behavior.

"What I've been trying to ask since earlier! What I'm trying to figure out is if what you said is true then...uhh...basically, you spent the night with Mia, but masturbated...which means that you didn't...er...do it with Mia?"

"I didn't."

"I don't believe you! C'mon, why didn't you? Mia is a babe and a wonderful woman with a personality that's like a breath of fresh air. Sure, she's willful and has a hard time reading the room, but she lured you into a dark room and basically begged you to take her. And yet a guy like you who looks like he's had over a hundred

women didn't touch her... How could I believe that?" Wei ranted.

"I'm a Beast Blood."

"I know that much. And that makes it...even more surprising... Did you reject Mia?"

"No. A scoundrel like me shouldn't touch a lady like Yumi. You said it yourself—I don't even have citizenship. We're from different worlds. A good human man like you is better for her."

Zelaide repeated what he told Manuela to Wei. He thought he had kept his voice flat, but it didn't work on Wei. The cop uncomfortably scratched the side of his head.

"...Sorry. I was wrong. Don't look so hurt. I feel like the bad guy here... Dang it. Fine! I'll do what I can to look into things. I'll go for broke!"

"Thanks."

"It's fine. Your intel sounds worth investigating. There's a chance a terrorist is roaming Biotechnology's inner ranks, right?"

They've definitely gone through a lot of trouble just to take down one Beast Blood. Wei's cop instincts told him something was up.

If the case just stopped at them killing the Beast Blood prostitute and framing Zelaide for the murder, Wei could chalk it up to a hate crime committed by Infernum. From a public safety standpoint, it was a vicious and violent crime, but not one that shakes the foundation of the municipal government. But peel back the layers and it was a different story—Zelaide was intimately connected to the mayor's sister. Wei was already aware of the countless incidents they had been dragged into.

What if those weren't just a bunch of bad coincidences, but situations designed to kill them? Not to mention there were always risks when killing Beast Bloods. You never knew what connections they had, or if one of their kin was some big shot Hunter that would hunt you down until the day they killed you.

Last but not least was the irrefutable evidence in the most recent murder case. If Zelaide's testimony was true, then the sperm was collected deep inside Biotechnology's breeding lab. Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute was a critical facility to Gothic City's existence. It was home to indispensable information and history about this world, influencing everything from the academics, medicine, energy, technology, to ultimately the food supply. Life on a frontier world would be much harder without it. A terrorist lurking inside the institute was a dire threat to every

planetary citizen.

"They've gone to too much trouble just to get you," Wei concluded.

"I can protect her if I can get out of here." The Beast Blood quietly closed his eyes.

"....."

Wei finally figured out why this man didn't lay a finger on Euphemia. More than class differences, more than being carried away by the moment, Zelaide cared about Euphemia. He treasured her to the point he hesitated to touch her.

Good grief. How could he say she's just a client with a straight face? Aren't they in love with each other? For that matter, what's with him calling her "Yumi"? Don't go giving her a name only you can use! Wei kept his grievances to himself.

"Don't get any bright ideas, big guy. Don't jump the gun. The men who make all the decisions are dying to turn you into a criminal. They're so desperate it's suspicious. That's what got me interested in seeing why."

"I could get out right now if I wanted to." Zelaide finally lifted his head, eyes glowing.

"Cool. How?"

"By taking you hostage."

"Huh? Me? How?" Blinking, Wei pointed to himself.

"The wall is weak right here, where these holes are." Zelaide pointed to the panel where thin pinholes were opened to hear him speak. "There were always several goons during the usual interrogations, but if you look the other way for the second it'll take me to rip through the wall, then it's possible."

"Eek! Seriously? Beast Bloods are hecka powerful. But I don't think that's a good plan."

"I know. They'll put me on the wanted list and send guys after me right away. I won't be able to approach Yumi again if I'm a wanted man on the run."

"Mayor Saionji's ratings will tank too. The citizens have been bashing her lately because of the rise in incidents. Her achievements have carried her this far, but if something worse happens, she'll stand no chance during reelection. If worse comes to worst, they'll even banish her from Gothic City."

"Yeah...but I..."

I'm goin' crazy with worry for Yumi... Zelaide hadn't seen

Euphemia for five whole days now. *Her sister likely won't let her take a step outside her private floors, but that stubborn seductress won't sit still for long. She's definitely trying to make something crazy happen as we speak. No, maybe she's already done it.*

Zelaide squeezed his knees so tight he heard bone pop.

I want to see you, Yumi. Why does it hurt so much...?

"Just wait," Wei consoled the miserable-looking Beast Blood. "They'll definitely make their move if we wait a little longer. If what you said is true, then confining you here is just phase one of their plans. They're going to have to move into phase two soon."

"....."

"You're worried about Mia, right? Dang. You say one thing, but your actions tell me you're smitten with her! Dang it! I'm so jealous!"

"Smitten?"

"Yeah! You didn't have sex with that amazing woman even after she seduced you! And your reasoning is for her sake? Just how much do you treasure Mia?! If that's not having the hots and being in love, then I don't know what is! Dang it! You're killing me! It's like torture watching you... Are you even listening?"

"Smitten...the hots...in love... Humans have a lot of ways to express things."

Mate—that single word held more meaning to a Beast Blood than the hundreds of ways humans tried to describe their feelings.

"...I knew it...you..."

Wei couldn't believe what he was witnessing. The Beast Blood who looked like a living sculpture just turned his head to the side, pink in the cheeks. The dark color of his skin made it hard to tell, but he was definitely blushing.

"Shut up... Anyway, take care of Yumi. If anything happens to her, I'll smash through this wall, grab you by the neck, and charge outta here."

"Ugh! It's scary because I know you'll do it!"

†††

TWO days later.

Mayor Saionji received an emergency call from Gothic City's chief of police.

“Saionji! We’ve got trouble! We just received word from Biotechnology’s president—there was a Level D accident!”

“Explain.”

“Bijours... He said that Bijours escaped from their cages!”

The emergency call was about several highly dangerous Bijours having escaped from their cages in the Dangerous Organisms Breeding Pavilion. Mayor Saionji’s aides went blue in the face at the news, even though there were no reports of them escaping outside yet. Bijours attacked anything that moved. Anyone who crossed paths with them wouldn’t live to tell the tale.

Erica remained calm. “This is a biohazard. Call President Murakami at once.”

†Chapter 3: The Fight Outside the Cage†

“ERICA! Why did you let them arrest Zelaide?! You’re horrible! How could you? He’s innocent!” Euphemia charged, barging into Erica’s office.

“...Can you lower your voice, please? It’s echoing in my ears.” Erica sank into her office chair, worn out.

Euphemia rarely saw her sister look exhausted. Erica never showed fatigue at work, even when they were alone. She still had a full day ahead of her too.

“You look tired,” Euphemia said softer, restraining some of her anger.

Yelling at the only person capable of helping wouldn’t improve the situation. Erica’s secretary and aides waited outside the office to give the siblings space.

“I’m sorry... But I’m not baselessly claiming his innocence, Erica. He doesn’t have any reason to kill the prostitute...to kill Manuela. He has no determinable motive, and even if he had one, he’s currently my bodyguard,” Euphemia attested. “He’s a professional. He wouldn’t ruin a limited-time job opportunity by committing such a blatantly obvious murder. I mean think about it, he hunts some of the world’s most carnivorous creatures, why not just toss her corpse to them rather than leave it defiled where anyone can find it?”

“I can piece that much together myself, thank you,” Erica sighed. “This is clearly a threat aimed at me.”

“Then why—”

“That was an arrest warrant with an authentic authorization number. In other words, the chief of police officially ordered his arrest. Arguing the point with officers acting under official orders wouldn’t help Zelaide, you, or me. Zelaide went with them without a fight because he understood that. You can’t figure that out?” Erica asked, rebuke edging into her tone.

“...I know that, but it’s a trap. Once they have him in custody, they won’t let him out again...”

“Even so, we have to play by the rules of this city. He bought us time.”

“...Time...” Euphemia repeated.

“Yes. Now it’s up to us to carefully and daringly make things happen. We are going to repay Zelaide for his help along the way.”

Erica’s logical explanation rendered Euphemia speechless. She collapsed onto the sofa with a heavy thud. “Was that your plan all along? I’m sorry. I panicked...”

“You did. You acted rash and without thinking. Confessing your love in front of our enemies essentially shackled Zelaide and put an even greater target on his back.”

“...It did, didn’t it? My confession is a burden...for you, too...”

Saying she loved Zelaide in front of Erica’s two anti Beast Blood proponents was a dumb move, even if it was the truth—no, especially because it was true. She realized that after she calmed down enough to think straight. Overcome with regret, Euphemia buried her face in her hands.

“I’m always so dumb, never thinking before I act...”

Erica exhaled a small sigh and offered a wry smile for her remorseful sister.

“We can’t do anything about the past. What matters now is coming up with our next move. I’ve allowed my opponents to act first and suffered for it. With Zelaide’s arrest my options are limited. On the bright side, we can now determine who set him up and perhaps discover the true puppeteer hiding in the shadows.” Erica swept her bangs out of her face.

“The enemy assumes I can’t do anything without damaging my position because they brought the police into this, but I’m not such a fool to have no connections at the precinct,” she continued. “My net might not be as wide, but I do have my own supporters who will act without drawing attention. Let’s start by investigating what evidence they fabricated and submit it.”

“Erica...”

“I won’t forgive them for cruelly taking someone’s life just to overthrow me.”

Erica is furious...

The always calm and logical Erica was enraged. Euphemia sat up straight and realized this wasn’t the time for her to whine and do nothing. This was where she needed to become a wise and bold woman capable of crossing swords with an unseen enemy.

"You convinced me, Erica. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Didn't you have a police officer friend?"

"Yes. Wei Lin-jie."

"I'll look into him."

"Why? He's a good guy. You suspect him?" Euphemia defended one of her few good friends. Wei would be moved to tears if he knew. But Erica wasn't so lenient.

"You know, it's about time you learned it's dangerous to judge people based on their outward personality. I trust the facts I have researched. And not even the facts tell you the whole picture. I draw my conclusions about a person after I have looked into them from various angles."

"...What will you do after you look into him?" Euphemia asked, leaning forward on the couch.

"I'll use him if he's as good as you say. He's a normal police officer, so he will have an easier time poking around than us. Contact him when I give the okay, Mia. I can't be the one to ask him. Be extremely careful not to bring up my name," Erica warned, brushing a stray hair behind her ear.

"Got it. You proceed using your methods, and I'll proceed using mine."

"Were you even listening to me?" Erica panicked, sensing the underlying danger in Euphemia regaining her usual stubborn calm.

She knew her younger sister never backed down once she made up her mind.

"You're planning on going back out there, aren't you? Don't. I understand your feelings, but for the time being behave under my protection. Any action you take will throw mud on Zelaide's sacrifice."

"I'm stubborn and dumb, but not that dumb. I won't go back to my apartment or Zel's house. I'll be your annoying house guest for the time being. Under one condition: let me continue my research."

"You want to keep working?" Erica sighed. "That's the last thing you should do right now."

"No, it's exactly what I should be doing. I've been crossbreeding the gerbils and have finally created an immune generation that only eats Night Blooms. They have a huge appetite too. If I can increase their numbers, we could literally nip Nightz in the bud. At the very least we will be able to reduce its numbers. There is also the possibility of my gerbils leading police to illegal

Night Bloom farms too!”

“I’m opposed to it. You will become their next target... It wasn’t long ago that the biker gang attacked you. I won’t let you out of my sight until I have a feasible lead on who to go after. Don’t even think about asking me to have the Guardians escort you to and from work. I can’t use them for personal reasons.”

“My research doesn’t have to be done outside your protection,” Euphemia suggested with a smile.

“What do you mean? Ah! You can’t possibly be thinking of...” Erica pressed her hand against her temple. She had a bad feeling about where this was going. Her foolhardy little sister’s brain was running in full gear.

“Exactly that. I’m going to have my adorable gerbils come to me,” Euphemia announced with delight. “I’m not going to stay locked up in this tower doing nothing. I can fight back against the enemy in my own way.”

“Hold on! Are you going to turn the clean and sacred City Hall into a gerbil nest?”

“How rude! My gerbils are as clean as City Hall. Anyway, I’ll make it work out. Size is about the only thing this place has going for it. The real problem is how to get the gerbils and equipment here. You also believe there’s a spy working at Biotech, right?”

“Of course. Hard to ignore after the rare snakelike Muta attacked you at Zelaide’s house.”

“Oh, you mean the Chude? Have you learned anything further?”

“Still haven’t received word on it,” Erica admitted.

“Who do you have looking into it?”

“I can’t tell you yet. They’re a bit of a fruitcake, but incredibly skilled. I know they will do their part once they are confident who the traitor is.”

“Hmm.” Euphemia was quite surprised. She didn’t know Erica trusted someone that much at Biotechnology.

I wonder who it is. Probably not any of my coworkers. Maybe Director Burhardt? He seems likely. Erica and the Director are kind of similar types... Or is it someone higher up? I hope it’s Director Burhardt...

“On that note, I will talk to that person about your rodents and see what can be done. Better for me to take action than let you run wild.”

“Thank you, Erica!”

“Keep them contained. I won’t stand for any documents or cables being chewed.” Erica shivered at the thought of a bunch of rodents running around her office.

“I promise to keep them under control. Give me a big room that can be sealed off.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. Behave in your room for today and tomorrow. You mustn’t set foot outside my residence,” Erica warned her sister who had regained her usual vigor.

“At least let me help your secretary—”

“No need. You will only increase my workload. All right, we are done talking for today. I have work to do.” Erica’s long, manicured finger pressed a button on top of her desk. The head of her secretarial staff immediately entered the office. “Hello, Naomi. Show my sister to her room. Also, I hate to burden you, but can you keep an eye on her today?”

†††

ERICA received a report two days later from her police insider while she was reviewing the initial data he’d sent her beforehand.

A grin tugged at her lips when she saw the name attached to the short message accompanying the report. She promptly took action as she wasn’t one to let opportunity get away from her.

First, she returned her gaze to the report on the prostitute homicide case she had obtained through alternate means. Notes were scribbled in the margins. The case was definitely full of holes.

Looks like I can use the man named Wei. I’ll have Mia get in touch with him. She probably won’t stay cooped up for much longer. But will she be able to persuade him with crocodile tears? Well, they might not be so fake where Zelaide is concerned.

“She’s worried enough I’m sure she can pull it off,” Erica muttered.

This will open up a route of communication with Zelaide inside the station. Their evidence for the homicide looks solid at first, but if we can unravel it...it might become the little leak that sinks the puppeteer’s behemoth of a ship that keeps crime afloat in my city.

Erica narrowed her eyes. She was ready.

The laboratory comes next. I don’t want to deal with him, but the

situation calls for it.

Erica pulled out the mayor's exclusive IHT. She pressed the dial button and the other side picked up right away. They were comically quick to answer.

"Hi! It's meeee! You rang?" a high-pitched, quirky voice responded. His choice of words was just as wacky and unprofessional.

Erica decided in advance to ignore his playful banter. Putting up with his quirks was the only way to interact with this person. "It's me. I know you are busy, but I need you here as soon as possible."

"Whaaa? You jest. You surely know just how unbusy I am, Queenie. I have so much spare time my lackeys won't even talk to me anymore."

"You are the one joking around. Just how many people have you deceived with that quirky act of yours? Let's leave it at that. Will you come? Or not?"

"Of course I'll come. If it is Queen Erica's request, I shall hasten to your side at once. My goddess."

"Call me mayor. There is something I need you to bring with you. My sister is being a pest. I want you to bring everything she left in her laboratory. Charge it as a personal expense."

"What? Everything in her lab? Not just the data? Whoa. By personal expense, you mean at your expense, right? Right?"

"Of course. I don't know what's in her lab, but Mia made a list. I'm sending it to you now, so make the appropriate arrangements. Make sure you are disguised when you do it."

"Oh dear! I was informed about your younger sister's research. Has something to do with Nightz, right? You will end up with a lot on your hands if you take her whole lab. A whole lot of...uh...rodents...that is."

"So it seems. I dislike rodents, so it gives me the chills thinking of living with them. But she said she wants at least half of the population from her lab. I don't really understand what she is doing, but she claims the more generations there are the greater the chance of limiting what they eat, so she has to keep breeding them. She feeds them Night Bloom seeds. That child is passionate about putting an end to Nightz with those rodents."

"She sounds like a fine sister who burns with a sense of purpose. Her personality differing so much from her appearance

and the first impression she gives is also quite nice...indeed."

"You could say that. I likely would have had the same opinion as you if she wasn't my own sister. But she is my one and only family. I need a good reason to keep her from leaving and to bring you here without it looking unnatural. I have a lot of work to attend to here, you see."

"I see... You seem to have your hands full."

"I always have my hands full. At any rate, please take care of any preparations needed for transport and come here quick. Never forget that I always have high expectations of you."

"Spare my blushes. Then in order to meet your expectations I'll let loose for the first time in a while and ride in on a white horse to see you right now—"

"Please come the normal way! You hear me? Please do your absolute best to come by normal means. Do you know how much attention you will draw riding in with a cage of rodents? Please act normal! NORMAL!" Erica emphasized. It was rare for her to raise her voice. She was dealing with someone normal communication didn't work on. Of course, the person she was talking to was fully aware that transporting the gerbils was simply the official excuse for his visit.

"Do you understand?" she asked for good measure.

"Your very wish is my command, my goddess."

"Call me mayor! Otherwise, I'll draw the delivery fee from your salary."

The call ended in silence.

Erica folded her fingers under her chin and contemplated the situation.

The future was glum. But it had to be done. She prioritized Gothic City's peace and the citizen's safety over all else. The enemy was nearby. But without solid, irrefutable proof, they would slip through her fingers, and once they did, she'd never get another chance to catch them. She had to proceed carefully and with certainty.

"I expect much from you, President Murakami."

Erica slowly rose from her chair.

“BEAST BLOOD Zelaide Silvergray. Get out!” a gruff voice ordered. The shout echoed off the thick, unscratched walls, causing the man lying on the bed bolted to the wall to crack open his eyes.

Zelaide stood in silence. Being confined for more than a week didn’t impair his catlike movement.

The clothes and shoes they removed from him when he was detained were placed on a cart and pushed inside the cell. He stripped off the prisoner garments that had been forced on him in the detention center. Pulling on his leathers felt like putting his second skin back on. There was comfort in his familiar clothing. His weapons weren’t returned, however.

“Your weapons will be returned in the chief of police’s office,” the police officer explained in a dry voice, his face hidden beneath a cap. Zelaide’s silence seemed to have earned him an explanation at least.

†††

“SO you’re Zelaide, eh? Mm-hm, you’re a keeper. You got caught between a rock and a hard place this time around, huh? But your patience is admirable.”

Zelaide was escorted into the filthiest room at the back of the police station. In other words, it was the janitor’s closet near the rear entrance.

Zelaide suspected his release was top secret, but didn’t expect to meet with two men in a cramped closet. He recognized one face—the chief of police.

The other man looked strange. He wore gaudy clothes over his short and plump body, and his shaggy hair was thinning at the crown of his head, drawing attention to the roundness of his face. He topped his peculiar looks off with perfectly round, antiquated specs.

The man was round and curvy from top to bottom.

“Come along—”

“W-Wait, President Murakami! We still haven’t proven he isn’t the murderer yet. Seeking help from him is like playing with fire,” advised Gothic City’s Chief of Police with a gruff tone seeped in irritation. “This man is a purebred Beast Blood without any documentation. He’s a ferocious, unintelligent, dangerous creature.

He's about as useful as using fire to put out fire. His brain doesn't work the same way as ours. Don't treat him like he's human."

The chief could only be so frank because he held absolute confidence that Zelaide would never hurt him inside the police station. Case in point, Zelaide ignored him entirely and focused his full attention on the middle-aged man called Murakami. He recognized that name.

"Oh dear, are you racist? I'm not."

"Some of my direct subordinates were slaughtered by a Beast Blood when I was working the field as an inspector. That monster had the same eyes as this one here," the chief hissed in a voice laced with vitriol.

"My, you had a painful experience there. That's a shame. But you know, I actually love all primates from bonobo to homo habilis. Oh, that includes all extinct species too, mind you. Naturally that also extends to humans and Beast Bloods. So I'm very intrigued by this young man with those supremely striking eyes." Murakami casually brought up the sciences in a way a layman might be able to follow him. This was the president of the world's leading research institute's method of dealing with the grim-faced police chief. Then he turned to Zelaide. "Everyone envies those eyes of yours, don't they?"

"...You're Biotech's president?" Zelaide asked moodily.

"Bingo! You know me? I'm Murakami. Akio Murakami. You'd make me the happiest researcher in the world if you remember me!" Murakami winked with his small, beady eyes. Unfortunately for him, both the Beast Blood and the police chief pretended not to see it.

"Why are ya here? What's goin' on?"

"Hoho? It's not 'What do ya want with me?' but 'What's goin' on?' eh? See, chiefy, this young man's intelligence far surpasses what you give him credit for. Don't you agree?" Murakami asked Zelaide and cheerfully gave the peace sign only to be ignored again.

"Sorry, but can ya cut to the chase?"

"Ooh, my bad. Sorry for playing around at a time like this... I'll tell you then, but it's a bit of an embarrassment for us, so I'd rather not talk about it."

Zelaide patiently waited for him to continue.

"To tell you the truth, three of the Bijours in our care slipped out of the breeding pens due to a work blunder."

“Bijours got out?” Zelaide’s eyes widened.

Bijour—a beautiful and ferocious reptilian Muta. They should have been kept in Biotechnology’s Tier 1 Hazardous Organism Sector under their highest security.

Yet Murakami calmly spoke of an security breach that shouldn’t have been possible at the world’s leading research facility.

“Did they escape outside? Or inside?”

“The silver lining in all this is that they’re still in the building. We managed to seal off that sector. Feeding and cleaning is automated, so we fortunately only lost several drones and don’t have any human casualties on our hands. However, those agile, intelligent Bijours escaped through the feeding crane when it opened, smashed through the air vent, traveled through the piping, and are hiding somewhere deep within the walls. This is a Level D Emergency.”

Yeah right. There’s more to this.

Murakami casually returned Zelaide’s look of intense disbelief.

“It’s a separate sector where we keep the most dangerous Mutas. Of all the facilities that research Bijours, ours has been around the longest and was the safest until this happened. Drones are currently searching the vents and pipes, but even if we know where they are hiding, catching them is another story. They are known for mauling anything that moves. So much money has been lost in destroyed equipment.”

“What ’bout the sensors?”

“The normal heat sensors don’t work well on coldblooded Muta. Plus, they’re extremely slender. We have motion sensors, but Bijours move so quick, it has a hard time tracking them. We can’t send the hunting dogs in against such bloodthirsty creatures, and Guardians would demand an artillery strike on the facility rather than put people in danger. So that’s why...” Murakami purposely paused there.

“You need me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Doesn’t it sound a little too convenient? I’m a murder suspect. You guys didn’t listen to me for days no matter how much I insisted I didn’t do it,” Zelaide said to the police chief. The police chief shamelessly turned his nose up.

“Come now, hear me out without getting angry,” Murakami said persuasively. “Letting the Bijours escape is on me. I don’t look

the part, but I'm actually an authority figure in this city. I don't stand out much, but I'm a big player. That's why I want to quietly and peacefully solve this issue before it gets out...or it could end bad. So I looked into Gothic City's Muta Hunters for the best beastly for the job."

"....." Zelaide cocked an eyebrow at him.

"And what do you think the results were? I checked every databank, talked directly to people in the know, and everything led me back to the same person. You." After a slight pause, Murakami hardened his tensionless round face. "So I'm asking you to recapture the Bijours."

"For free?"

"No, no. I'll compensate you, of course. I will back up your innocence and have a third party organization reevaluate the evidence presented against you at this station. You will be able to get out of here depending on the results." Murakami deliberately lowered his voice.

"This is actually Erica's doing. According to our own investigation, a normal suspect in your situation would have been released due to insufficient evidence, but under the current special circumstances, you won't be released unless something major happens. It's not like they can keep you under house arrest, and everyone knows no cop can keep tabs on you. So taking down the Bijours is your little offering to the big guys upstairs. You understand, right? You have to do this job right. Otherwise I really will be fired."

"Can I kill 'em?"

"Such a waste of resources, but I will allow it. I can just send you out into the Wilds to catch more. Just don't blow up the building and we're good." Murakami grinned.

"You have a lot of demands."

"Sorry. But you'll still do it. You have to, right? Just so you know, Bijours are immune to pain despite how agile they are and tranquilizers don't work on them. Oh and they become even more ferocious when they are hungry."

"This offering might cost me my life..."

With all that said and done, Zelaide finally set foot outside his interrogation cell for the first time in a week.

The winds were already showing signs of the coming autumn.

“**THIS** the place?”

Biotechnology’s Tier 1 Hazardous Organism Sector was located far from the pavilion where Euphemia and her team worked. This large cylindrical building isolated from the rest of the research grounds was one of the sectors that contained large and carnivorous Muta.

Three Bijours had escaped containment. A malfunction caused the automated crane not to close its shutter after depositing food in the containment area. The Bijours escaped through that partial gap in the security system.

The surveillance room immediately detected the malfunction and sounded the alarm. Employees evacuated the building, every block was sealed, and the sensors and drones were turned on to locate the loose Mutas. But despite narrowing the search field, they had no success capturing the dangerous creatures.

While the drones were equipped to take down Mutas, they were typically chomped on or swiped out of the air the second they moved. Making drones almost useless within the confines of a building against the quick Bijours.

Bijours were also said to have exceptionally high-intelligence and were wary of humans. They never stayed in one place for long. That was one of the reasons they were touted as a rare species.

“This should be enough space...”

Zelaide was currently in the cylindrical building’s lobby. He sensed nothing from the blindingly bright white space.

They’re here. They’re hiding in the walls. His Hunter instincts blared in warning.

“I’ve entered the lobby. Turn off the lights,” he instructed the control room through the small microphone attached under his coat.

“Done.”

The lights clicked off. Nocturnal Bijours didn’t enter bright spaces. They preferred to move in tight, cold places. They originated from a broad expanse of dense woodland known as the Sea of Trees.

Zelaide thrust one arm into the bag he carried on his shoulder. A freshly killed goat was inside.

“Come an’ get it. Sorry it ain’t alive like ya like ’em, but it’s

plenty hot. It's dinner time, boys."

Around a day had passed since they had escaped.

Bijours were ravenous eaters. They couldn't resist the sweet scent of a fresh kill. Zelaide sunk his claws into the goat's neck and ripped it open. Blood gushed out. He brought his face to the opening, sank his teeth into the fleshy neck, and tore off a chunk as he shook his neck to the side like a dog.

"Heh heh heh... Look, I'm a beast just like you. Come an' join me for a meal." Zelaide let out a ghostly laugh after swallowing the warm chunk of meat.

I don't cling to life. If I wanted to live peacefully, I woulda never become a Hunter.

As it was, many Beast Bloods born from human parents jumped through various hoops to finally receive permission to live among humanity despite the discrimination.

But among their species were those who gave up on society or fled into the outside world because they couldn't integrate into society. Though they were isolated from humanity, they created their own culture and unique society with fellow Beast Bloods, which often led to them finding mates and leaving behind offspring.

Zelaide's parents fell into the latter category.

I don't mind dyin'. I'm good as long as my enemy deals a quick and lethal blow. I live every day prepared to take as many enemies down with me and slit my own throat before they can miserably torture me to death. I've never thought my life had value.

But I can't die now. I don't want to die, Zelaide thought. *Because I have Yumi. I'm responsible for destroyin' her enemies and returnin' her to her sister once I know she can live in peace.*

"Responsible? Me?"

Zelaide found his usage of a word unfit for Beast Bloods funny.

It works. I don't know a better word. I'll leave it at responsible. I'll free Euphemia. Then I'll leave this city. That was Zelaide's plan. Once he returned her where she originally belonged, men would immediately flock to her.

She doesn't look it, but she's a strong-willed, hardworking, good woman. There are thousands of better men for her than me out there. I know a man who measures up to Saionji's standards will make her his. Isn't that how it was always gonna be?

Zelaide squeezed the goat carcass's neck. Blood splattered everywhere, painting an ominous pattern on the wall.

Aaah, she's gonna belong to another man? Some man I don't know is gonna lie with her and dirty her.

NO!

"Never! I won't let 'em!"

Dark flames ignited in Zelaide's body and heart. It quickly became a lump of scorching heat that ate away at him.

No, no, no, no, no, no. I won't allow it.

A strange odor began to permeate the sanitary space. Part of the odor came from the lukewarm blood dripping from the carcass. The other was completely different—a sickeningly sweet fragrance that had nothing to do with flowers or fruit.

It was the sweet odor Bijours exuded.

"...You came, beasts." Zelaide's pupils contracted, awakening his instincts as a Beast Blood. "Aaaaaah!" He bent backward and roared to the ceiling. "I'll kill ya!"

She's my mate. My woman. My—

"Life!"

His wide-open eyes glowed.

Slender shadows jumped over his head.

Zelaide leapt backward and chucked the goat at the wall in front of him. It splattered against the white wall and slid down, leaving a trail of blood behind.

SPLAT!

A single pink shadow soundlessly landed in the middle of the lobby—the Bijour.

†††

THE pungent smell of blood and sweet death hung heavily in the impregnable darkness. Fortunately for Zelaide, Beast Bloods possessed excellent night vision.

Large reptilian Muta covered in striking pink scales soundlessly landed in the middle of the spacious lobby. Bijours always paused for a second after making any large movements, almost as if they were an actress posing before an audience.

The Bijour curiously tilted its slender neck toward Zelaide. He saw his own reflection in the Muta's large, crimson eyes before it dropped its gaze to the bloodied goat.

Bijours were said to be one of the most intelligent Muta on the

planet. It made its decision in a split second. Seemingly deciding it could eat the dead goat at any time, the Bijour faced Zelaide and opened its large mouth as if to claim dominance.

This species didn't have any vocal cords to howl or growl with. However, they knew that showing off their razor-sharp fangs intimidated most prey. In a smooth motion, it crouched and sprung at Zelaide. Its muscular hind legs extended, launching it toward its prey at tremendous speed.

Zelaide jumped a good several feet backward to maintain a wider field of view.

Three Bijours had escaped containment. This was one of the three. These Muta excelled at hunting large game in packs. While one distracted the prey, another would take it down from behind. Against one, Zelaide had a sufficient chance of winning, but against three? The odds were not in his favor.

"Tch! Damn overgrown pink perfume lizards..."

I have to take out at least one first. Before the other two show up.

Zelaide dodged the Bijour's lunge attack and raised his favorite gun. The barrel was short, but he wouldn't miss at this distance—if he was fighting anything other than a Bijour.

The agile and gorgeous Muta was made of pure muscle and moved faster than a bullet in short bursts. And since they didn't feel pain, there was no way to seal their movement unless he broke its legs or dealt a lethal blow.

The Bijour in front of Zelaide paused as if confused by this prey that easily dodged its attacks, but after a quick twitch of its jaws as if assessing the situation, it launched into the air again. It seemed confident since Zelaide had his back up against the wall. Its graceful long tail sliced through the air.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Zelaide rolled on the floor and fired three times at the smooth belly of the beast passing overhead. One shot missed and pierced the glass ceiling. The second shot hit its side and the third pierced its femur. But the Bijour landed effortlessly and twisted its long neck back to look at Zelaide. The third shot seemed to have severed a nerve in its femur as it struggled to turn its whole body around.

"No time for a stare off, pink lizard."

Zelaide bent his knees in an offensive stance. The bullet only dented the tough ceiling glass without shattering it, but the vibrations were enough to lure the second Bijour into the upper

lobby floor.

The injured one comes first.

Zelaide drew a large survival blade from his thigh holster and ran along the wall before the injured beast could initiate its next attack. He lunged at the Bijour's head that had twisted around to look at him with emotionless eyes. This was Zelaide's first preemptive strike during the fight.



He slid under the long neck stretched out to bite off his head and sliced through the tender fan-shaped trapezius muscles with his knife.

SPLATTER!

Blood sprayed from the severed artery. The beast from primeval times stayed upright for a few seconds before finally toppling over. But Zelaide didn't have a moment to catch his breath. A second Bijour sprang into action while he was preoccupied with the first. It landed in a crouch in the exact place Zelaide stood before inflicting the deathblow to the first Bijour. It immediately rose to full height and slowly moved its crimson eyes over the room.

Things only got worse as the third Bijour jumped down from the rafters.

"Looks like the odds are against me tonight..."

The third Bijour silently landed a few feet away. Its jaw twitched with anticipation.

Blood streamed from Zelaide's shoulder. He had avoided the sharp fangs, but not the knifelike claws that shot up underneath them. The gnarly claws had sliced through his thick leather jacket into the flesh below. He could still move his arm, but the wound was deep.

The second Bijour didn't even look at its fallen packmate, its neck careening toward Zelaide instead. Mutas were incapable of emotion, but it almost looked like it was sneering at its wounded prey. It planned on ripping him to shreds and then slowly feasting on his body.

Sorry, but I ain't on the menu. I can't die. Not until I see her again.

Oddly enough, while Zelaide didn't trust humans, he believed the deal Murakami cut him. The short, round-faced middle-aged man who jabbered about stupid things was unlike any human he'd ever met. When he looked at Zelaide, the eyes hidden behind his round specs glimmered with fascination, not discrimination.

So Zelaide believed he had to defeat the Bijours per Murakami's orders. Because that was likely the stage Murakami prepared to save him.

Zelaide kept his eyes on the second Bijour and honed his senses to detect the third. Rather than stalking him, the third seemed intent on devouring the goat corpse he had tossed aside

before the fight started. Was it that hungry? Or was it just leaving the troublesome prey to its packmate? Either way, it was lucky for Zelaide. Not even a Beast Blood was guaranteed to survive an attack from two Bijours at the same time. But he didn't have much time. For the gluttonous Bijours, a goat was nothing more than an appetizer.

"Savin' me for the main dish? In your dreams, pinky!"

One was dead, but the other two were unscathed. He needed to target one and seal its movement.

Zelaide crouched, muscles tensed before exploding into motion to give his jump more height. Flying through the air, he shot several times at the creature's knees—but the Bijour dodged before the bullets even came close. This was one of the largest species of Bijour, and it was easily several heads taller than Zelaide. In other words, not only was it fast, but it had the physical strength to match.

Crap! I missed! No time for regrets!

He set up his next attack without missing a beat. Flipping over in the air, his feet made contact with the cracked glass ceiling and launched him forward. Even the quickest Bijours were defenseless when they jumped.

The Bijour hopped back. Zelaide shot the wire from the device attached to his wrist and hooked it to the beam behind him, then let it reel him in while leaving his hands free. The wire pulled him up rather than letting him get closer to the floor. He held out his gun and knife to take on the mouth full of fangs charging at him as he rose higher into the air.

The Bijour jumped to tear off his legs, which it was very capable of doing if it caught one of his feet. Zelaide yanked his arm down, dragging him up, and slammed his foot on top of the Muta's head, avoiding its bite, and fired into the wide open red maw. Two bullets went down the monster's throat.

However—

The Bijour just staggered a little, and as soon as it landed, it looked up at Zelaide hanging from the beam. How much firepower could these creatures withstand?

That wasn't enough to do the trick either? Thick-skinned reptile... How in the world did they even capture these alive in the first place?

The bullets should've damaged its throat and internal organs. It may have slowly bled out in a protracted battle, but Zelaide

couldn't literally hang around all day waiting for it to weaken. Worst yet, when he looked down from the beam, he saw the third Bijour gulp down the last of the goat and turn its sights on the next prey—him.

I'm not high enough off the ground to be safe.

His height was working against him. If one of the Bijours jumped, they would tear him down from his knees. Releasing the wire from his wrist device and dropping down would only ensure he ended up in the two hungry Muta's bellies. Showering them with bullets wasn't an option either. Only one shot left. It didn't help that he was losing even more blood from his shoulder. The battle would result in his defeat if it prolonged.

Stimulated by the warm blood dripping from above, the uninjured third Bijour exploded into a burst of movement.

Hanging from the beam, Zelaide looked like a piece of raw meat strung up in the butcher's shop to the Muta. Fangs and claws of death reached for him. Zelaide swung like a pendulum and dropped forward as he released the wire at his wrist. His landing point: on top of the third Bijour's back. Between the creature's sudden speed and Zelaide's unexpected movement, the Bijour was caught unprepared.

He landed on the slender Bijour's muscular back. The creature's legs buckled under the sudden weight. As it was losing balance, Zelaide wrapped his legs around its neck and squeezed with all his strength, crushing the reptile's muscular neck between his thighs. Then, when he was about to be shaken off, he shot the last bullet into the back of its head. It wasn't just a close-range shot, but he actually had the barrel pressed against its medulla oblongata. There was no way for him to miss.

Taking a bullet to the brain, the Bijour fell dead on the floor, spraying brain matter from the bullet hole. Zelaide threw his arm down at the last second and rolled away before he could be crushed. He saw his gun slide across a floor covered in a sea of blood and brain matter. His moment of triumph was shattered as an even greater threat to his life literally bore down on him.

Zelaide had rolled right under the belly of the second beast that had quickly moved in for the kill.

"Aggh!"

Sandwiched between the Bijour's legs, it stared down at him with blood-red eyes. Blood dripped from its gaping maw, dirtying

Zelaide's face and hair—blood from the wounds inflicted by the bullet that went down its throat. Bloody saliva dripped in sticky globs.

Serrated fangs snapped at Zelaide's throat.

†Chapter 4: Desires Outside the Cage†

BIJOUR—the fiercest, wildest, and strongest Muta ever discovered.

Filling its body with organ shredding hollow points did nothing to weaken its instincts. Primeval blood coursed through its veins, demanding it kill the creature responsible for harming it. Truly, Bijour were a force to be reckoned with.

BANG!

The Bijour froze with its gaping maw inches from Zelaide's cervical vertebrae.

Zelaide wrested the lipless jaws away from his neck. Its sharp teeth cut through his tough leather gloves, piercing into the fingers he jammed into the soft pink flesh of its mouth. Blood ran down his arms.

“...Ngh!”

Deep gaping holes in his shoulder burned like hell. But letting it overpower him would lead to certain death.

“Graaaaah...!”

Gripping the Bijour's jaws, he painstakingly wrenched its mouth open. Blood and saliva poured from its maw. Voiceless cries of a creature with no vocal cords shook the lobby. The vibrations alone seemed to crack the air.

It blindly lashed out with its claws, tearing into Zelaide's leather coat. If its arms were only a little longer, those claws would've dealt a lethal blow. But Zelaide gradually spread his arms apart, opening the Bijour's mouth even further despite the claws and teeth sinking into his flesh.

SPLURT!

Gastric juices sputtered from the Bijour's mouth and rained on Zelaide. His immaculate silver hair was dirtied beyond recognition.

With a crack not unlike cannon fire, the Bijour's mouth ripped from top to bottom. Skin at the corners of its mouth tore and the broken jaw bone hung loosely from its muzzle.

“GHHH!”

Zelaide used every fiber of strength to shove off the Bijour

crushing down on him. Though he managed to stand, the wounds covering his body were more than skin deep. His shoulder had been cleaved open, his fingers had been torn down to the bone, and cuts of various sizes and severity marred his arms, chest, and sides. Not a single finger had made it out of the Bijour's razor maw without being bloodied. To top it off, he was drenched in the creature's unpleasant smelling, oddly colored bodily fluids.

And yet, after all they had both been through, the Bijour still jumped back to its feet after being tossed off. Its jaws no longer worked, but its claws and legs were still in perfect shape. Eyes redder than the blood gushing out of it burned with hatred.

"I'm screwed."

Zelaide's gun had slid to the other side of the lobby. He could make a run for it, but it'd take too long to fire with his mangled fingers. The only weapon he had on him was the knife secured in his thigh holster. That also wouldn't be easy to wield with his lack of grip.

But it was try or die.

Zelaide drew the knife from its holster, then extended some of the wire from his wrist and wrapped it tightly around his left hand so that the knife handle would stay in his palm. It acted like an improvised splint and only needed to work for a single attack.

The next attack would be the last.

The Bijour hunched in front of him knew that too. Its eyes were finally starting to glaze over.

The Bijour sank down on its haunches. This was the crouch that came before the death leap. Refined thigh muscles extended and then pulled in.

The Bijour jumped.

But the loss of blood and countless injuries reduced its jumping height significantly. Zelaide took advantage of that handicap.

He ran with his left hand raised, supporting it with his right to increase the strength of the attack, all the while avoiding the claws sweeping at him. His large knife sliced a straight line through the belly of the beast jumping over his head. His knife carved through the Bijour's peritoneum, spilling its blood and internal organs across Zelaide's back.

His whole body trembled with exhaustion. His head throbbed. His heartbeat rang in his ears.

Anyone who walked into the room would doubt it was once a pristine, white lobby. Three unmoving Bijours lay dead on the polished floors, their crimson scales shimmering in the slight light given off by the emergency signs.

The room was filled with the intense stench of blood and offal.

“Looks like you’re all done,” a lighthearted voice hummed down from the speakers.

Zelaide had already figured out that Murakami’s manner of speaking and choice of words was an act.

“Our system isn’t picking up any life signs from the three Bijours. I’m going to send in the medical relief team. Try not to move.”

“Don’t need it. I’ll leave on my own.”

“You all right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll unlock the door behind you then. Prepare yourself mentally to be washed down and patched up.”

“No need.”

“Too bad. This is my territory. You do as I say. Besides, it’s in your best interest. Got it?”

The large bulkhead in front of the door opened before Zelaide said anything. On the opposite side stood a grinning Murakami in his white lab coat. Behind him was the rescue team in white uniforms and men in blue work clothes waiting to clean up the lobby.

But the lot of them hesitated to enter the room. Shock and fear flashed across each face.

This man alone defeated three Bijours. That fact caused the humans to cower in fear.

This was what it meant to be a Beast Blood.

“Good work. I watched everything on the surveillance cameras. It was something else. An amazing fight. You worked hard,” Murakami praised Zelaide in an unchanged tone. His high-pitched voice didn’t sound any different whether it was over the speaker system or in person. But his round eyes expressed what he really thought on the inside.

“Come now, what are you all staring for? Not enough sleep? This man is severely injured. Patch him up before he bleeds out,” Murakami ordered the gaping rescue workers.

“No need. I’m goin’,” Zelaide gruffly refused.

Murakami grabbed his arm, not caring about the nasty smell and guts rubbing off on his white gloves.

“Nuh-uh. You can’t. Bites and scratches from animals don’t heal easily on their own. The bacteria are even worse from Mutas. Not even the toughest of Beast Bloods can defeat a bacterial infection. Bacteria are scary, you know? Do you want little bugs infesting your cuts? Besides, you can’t very well go get her looking like you just went through a meat grinder, now can you?”

Murakami was rattling on about baseless things unbefitting of a scientist again. Zelaide didn’t comprehend most of what came out of his mouth, but he did sniff out the one word that meant something to him.

“Go get her...? Explain.”

“I’m saying you should go pick up your princess once you don’t look like the walking dead. If you go the way you are now, she will surely be in tears. Do you want that?”

“.....”

I don’t want that.

“See? We’ve reached an understanding then,” Murakami continued in a quiet voice, taking Zelaide’s silence and lack of expression as obedience. “This is my request packaged as an order. At least stay in my care until we plug up the holes in you. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you’re nice and pretty and in her arms soon enough.”

Murakami raised his hand, signaling the rescue team. They gathered around Zelaide, removed his bloodstained clothes, and began spraying him with antimicrobial wound cleanser. This was Zelaide’s first time being touched by so many humans. He was more comfortable fighting them than being cleaned by them, but he put up with the discomfort.

As expected, his whole upper body was maimed. His shoulder was in particularly bad shape after taking a direct hit from the Bijour’s claws. Numerous cuts across his skin revealed the muscle and tendons beneath. Blood was still seeping down his arm, but he could see it hardening to clot the wounds. Another inherent benefit of being a Beast Blood: they were very hard to put down in any permanent fashion without a deathblow being delivered. Zelaide grimaced more from the tantalizing smell of blood than the pain or sting of the antiseptics.

“Good boy. I know this isn’t what you want, but put up with it

until tomorrow. Uhehehe. I can't wait. I get to *closely* examine these muscles," Murakami said, watching them wipe the blood off Zelaide's corded muscles.

"...Until tomorrow?"

"Yep, that's right. You'll be in the intensive care unit I prepared for the rest of the day. Rest assured. I don't look it, but I'm a doctor. Really. I have a medical license too. You and I will have a little chat while you're in there. You don't think I'm trustworthy? Aw, of course I'm not. But you just have to believe me anyway. You've got no other choice. After that, you'll be temporarily set free." Murakami blathered on with a smile that made his round face look rounder.

"...One day only," Zelaide dourly acceded.

The hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood up. Feeling a gaze pricking his back, Zelaide hastily spun around. His instincts screamed that the weight of this gaze didn't belong to any human. But all he saw was the rescue team and clean-up crew busily going about their work. Some were washing the floors, others were hauling away the Bijour corpses with a forklift, and there was even someone filming what was going on. Everyone was either dressed in blue work uniforms or lab coats, and they were all ordinary humans. The Bijours' eyes were wide open since they didn't have eyelids, but they were definitely dead.

So...what's this feeling? Something's not right...

Washed and disinfected, Zelaide bent down per the medic's insistence. The medic hung a towel over his shoulders. Then they asked him to follow them. They were going to take him to the hospital located within Biotech. Shaking his head at the medic's recommendation to ride in the hover cart, he walked alongside it instead, paying close attention to his surroundings. Murakami leisurely strolled behind him.

"Oh! Preserve the most intact Bijour as a research specimen. The other two are to be stuffed. Make sure you carefully preserve their innards. Please put the pieces back together as best you can. These Muta are expensive. Selling them might pay for the damages. Ah! Give me a scale. I want to use it on my keychain..."

"President Murakami."

"Hm? Ooh, hi Kreutz. You came too, huh? Did you watch the surveillance footage? Wasn't that a pretty epic fight?"

A man Zelaide recognized had called out to Murakami from

behind. He was Euphemia's direct superior Kreutz Burhardt. A shadow fell over his high-strung face when his eyes sized up Zelaide.

"I saw. You're the Beast Blood hired to be Euphemia's bodyguard, correct? What in the colonies happened to Mia? I haven't heard anything from her after receiving the official time-off request form."

"Ooh, her. Her older sister contacted me to say she will be taking custody of her for a while," Murakami answered in Zelaide's place.

Burhardt eyed his direct superior with suspicion. "Mayor Saionji contacted you? What happened?"

"Oh right, you backed her research, didn't you? You're such a good boss, meeting the demands of a young researcher hot off the press. But it seems she needs to take a break. I bet she angered her sister, which put this fella here out of a job. So I borrowed him today. Trust in me will plummet if it got out that Bijours escaped. I hope this gives me a small chance of keeping my job," Murakami blabbed on as they walked.

Burhardt nodded along, his eyes fastened securely on Zelaide the whole way.

"Anyway, Kreutz, you won't have her for a while. I know it will be hard with how busy you are, but I don't have any spare researchers to send to your department right now."

"....."

Murakami ignored Burhardt's chilling eyes and started talking to Zelaide next. "With that said, don't you rush out of here, either. Absolutely *do not move* until I say so. It's not too far to the on-site hospital, but are you okay walking? Whoa! Would you look at that?! You've already stopped bleeding! Beast Bloods are awesome! You know, I've always thought that you guys are the next stage in evolution for humanity. And if you are...uhehehe...this could make for a good thesis... I might get even more famous...!"

"Yeah, yeah. You will. Now will ya shut up for a bit?" The exhausted Beast Blood's tired, aching shoulders drooped.

†††

RAIN pelts the ground just before daybreak, cleansing the world at

its darkest every single day. The flow of water blesses the earth with moisture and washes away any traces of the bloody hunts left by the beasts prowling the forests in the dead of night.

For humans, the rainfall becomes a silver curtain, concealing a criminal's hidden crimes, an infant's peaceful sleep, and a couple's romantic tryst. And then, with the dawn's light, the rains retreat. Such is the unbroken cycle, the never-changing promise between the heavens and the earth.

This is exactly why this world's dawn is so incredibly beautiful—no matter what atrocities and absurdities will smear the day ahead.



I want to see her. I need to see her.

Zelaide knew that nothing would change even if he saw her. They were better off never meeting again. He understood that so well it ate away at him.

Even so, his desire to be in her presence again was greater than any siren's call.

Since thinking about her put him on the verge of going on a rampage, he had to push those thoughts to the back of his mind.

His car raced down the freeway, slipping between traffic with the skill of a professional racecar driver.

Rain pounded the Wilds as soon as the clouds rolled in. The heaviest downpour came at the start, pouring in sheets onto the ground dyed in impregnable darkness. It always ceased just before daybreak, and the ground dried back up by the afternoon. Until then, the whole planet was covered in a soaked veil of inky blackness. Rainclouds only circled the planet in the hours between night and morning. This was the one unbroken cycle on this ever-changing frontier.

In the distance, Zelaide could see Forzarin Gate, the symbol of Gothic City. Although it was hazy in the rain, Gothic City looked like a white sphere piercing the dark sky. The landscape was completely devoid of color.

Forzarin Gate was a barrier that allowed only registered vehicles into the city.

Passing through the many layers of defenses effortlessly, the

automated system took over the car after he input his final destination. Zelaide watched his vehicle drive onto the Circle Line that surrounded the city in a massive ring, his thoughts drifting toward his wounds and the person he missed most.

†††

THE lacerations on his shoulder, sides, and fingers hadn't healed yet, but the skin had sealed over enough to leave off the bandages.

Murakami had stitched up the gaping holes in his flesh, applied medicine to the smaller cuts, and then showed him to his car and told him to go home.

"The allegations against you have been dropped. I'm not crass, so I won't ask why you leaked your semen in the breeding room. But be aware that someone collected that and used it against you. Someone who works in Biotech," Murakami warned.

"I know. Who is it?" Zelaide asked in a low growl.

Murakami chuckled. "Can't tell you that yet. They're a sly little fox, so I don't have any definite proof. It's a confidential investigation that's currently underway, but I'm practically the only detective on the case, you know? It's a pity I haven't made much progress."

"....."

"In other words, I don't trust anyone other than myself. Especially at Biotech. I mean, this institute is amazing. Too amazing." Murakami pointed to the vast property visible through the parking garage window.

"A vast collection of scientific knowledge has been amassed within these walls. Including knowledge inherited from the old world. This place may be called Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute, but biotechnology only counts for a small portion of what we do here," Murakami continued to explain.

"Not even I know the intimate details of all the research that goes on within these grounds. Many projects are astronomically outside my field of expertise. Of course, our operating capital comes from the cities, but that's not our only source of income. We also accept requests from various companies and individuals in return for funding. So, it's a fact that Biotech is also where the hopes and desires of this world are concentrated."

"You manage the whole place by yourself?"

"Officially? Yes. But I don't intervene in everything. I wouldn't last a day if I put my fingers in every cookie jar. I only actively carry out the instructions I receive from the person who owns me."

"And that's someone I know." Zelaide cracked a slight smile. It was rare for him to smile at all.

Murakami coolly dismissed it. "I don't disclose sensitive information."

"Is she your mate?" Zelaide asked.

"Don't be absurd. There's nothing like that between us. I just want to be of use to her. I seek no repayment in return." Murakami's small round eyes winked as he repeated, "No physical *payment* that is."

His wink was met with silence.

"That's why I'm going about it carefully instead of going off my first guess like I prefer to do. After all, I won't be of use to that person if I just catch it by the tip and the lizard decides to cut off its tail."

"You can't just try your luck with your first guess?"

"Nuh-uh. No way. Being just a little off and catching someone lower on the rung will make everything fall apart. The true enemy on top will become even harder to catch."

"But then you'll know the guy who ran is the enemy leader, right?" Zelaide asked.

"All that will net us is the leader's name. That doesn't do us any good. There might be an even bigger fish behind him too. It won't hurt the mastermind to feign innocence if we put the blame on his underlings. And then the threat to the city will be even worse. It's still too soon to make a move."

"....."

"You look dissatisfied," Murakami observed.

"Obviously," Zelaide huffed.

"Okay, just so you know, while charging in guns blazing looks cool and works great against Bijours, your opponent is a bigwig with a very high social standing. Their influence likely reaches beyond Gothic City. Not someone I can easily do anything to. But odds are high that they will give themselves away soon. Once they find out you've been acquitted, they're going to fly into a rage. Your freedom is going to throw a wrench into their carefully weaved plot and shatter their tightly wound pride."

"Am I being acquitted for exterminating the Bijours?" Zelaide asked.

"Nope. Taking out the Bijours is an extra treat to silence those who aren't too happy about you getting released and want to complain about it. Well, not that it will shut up the gripers entirely, but that works just as well for us. Mayor Saionji's enemies just might expose themselves depending on how the cards fall. But the reason for your acquittal is that semen." Murakami squeezed one round eye in a painful wink and pointed at Zelaide's crotch.

Obviously Zelaide scowled.

So it is my fault that Manuela died. I gave the enemy reason to kill her. Murakami said he covertly sent her son to Ajanta City to keep him safe. I'm worried about him, but it'll only make things worse if I get involved.

"That being said, the semen collected from the victim and submitted as evidence undeniably belongs to you. There was too little to have come from sexual intercourse. It's absolutely implausible for a huge Beast Blood man like you to ejaculate significantly less than the adult human male's average amount," Murakami said with a straight face.

"And I can prove you aren't a special case in that regard because I have examined every inch of your body. That will be evidence in your favor. With that evidence, we can argue that someone collected your semen and injected it into the victim and scattered it around the room," Murakami finished.

"Collected it... It was the peeping creep who was watching us..." Zelaide snarled.

"That would be him. The amount coincides with what would be left behind if your story about masturbating in the breeding room and cleaning up with paper towels is true. You can't get much after it seeped into the paper and dried...and that's all that they were able to collect from the victim."

"Ah, I remember it being a soft and thick paper..." Zelaide muttered uncomfortably, accepting Murakami's theory.

"Of course we only have the best! They're disposable towels meant to be used in experiments. They soak up most liquids. What's a little extra sticky liquid to our laboratory grade cleaning rags!"

"....."

"Yeah, well that's something all right, masturbating in a rodent breeding room. Was it thrilling showing off to the rodents?"

“Shut up. You know why I did it.”

“Can’t say. But you sure know restraint. I was able to determine that you are still a young Beast Blood somewhere in your thirties from examining your teeth. That’s the age when humans are finally settling into adulthood... Also known as when they want to reproduce the most,” Murakami said suggestively.

“I hate women.”

Except for one. But I’m not tryin’ to have sex with her either. I just can’t keep my eyes off her...and sometimes I feel irresistible urges...

“But...am I really that young?” Zelaide asked, changing the topic. It was odd to be called young at thirty.

“You would never hear a human ask that. But I guess it makes sense when you don’t know much about your species. To be honest, I don’t know much about you guys either, but I brushed up by reading the findings of a certain scientist. Have you heard of Maurice DeLay? His primary field is Night Bloom research.”

“Like I’d know ’im. I don’t read... Wait, didn’t you say you’re a primate researcher at the station?”

“That was obviously a bluff. The ends justify the means, as they say. Didn’t you know that? Though it’s a fact that I have extensive knowledge about most living creatures.”

Zelaide was exasperated by Murakami’s shameless confession.

“In any event, you should learn a bit more about yourself. His name is Maurice DeLay. Read his paper,” Murakami advised.

“Don’t read.”

“That’s unfortunate. He lives in Romanesque City and has done a lot of research that could help you. Speaking of Maurice, he hasn’t done much lately. I wonder what happened.”

“How should I know? Okay, I’m leavin’. Thanks for your help. I might contact you again.”

Zelaide hopped into his car before Murakami could launch into another longwinded conversation.

Zelaide’s car smoothly accelerated as he stepped on the accelerator. The early dawn freeway made for a pleasant drive. But Zelaide had nowhere to go. He did have a temporary residence though.

What is Euphemia doing? Is she sleeping peacefully under her sister’s protection?

I want to see her. See her and peer into those mysterious emerald eyes. I’ll gaze into them and then...

And then?

Stupid brute. I won't even get to see her.

The sun broke the horizon, shining white into the depths of night.

†††

THE silver car pulled into the familiar driveway.

This manor with a classic exterior was Zelaide's current residence. The gate closed behind his car, all the sensors and defense systems activated, and the IHT panel in the car's dash showed the rooms being scanned for biological activity. It showed one marker moving around inside.

Somebody's inside. Who?

Doubt coursed through Zelaide for all of a second until he saw that marker speedily move from the second floor to the first, turn down the hall, and race to the entrance. Excitement tingled in his veins.

Only one person he knew moved like that.

Wilds take me. It's like nothing's changed... He cracked a wry smile, jumped out of the car, and raced to the porch fogged up by the rain. He made it there just as Euphemia burst through the front door, her face glowing.

At that moment, one bright color lit up his achromatic world.

"Zel!" Euphemia dashed out onto the porch, her untied golden tresses bouncing behind her, and leapt into the early morning downpour. By leaping she skipped the trouble of going down the steps. She didn't doubt for a moment that the man running toward her would catch her.



“Hey! That’s dangerous!” Zelaide shouted, his heart dropping to his stomach that he might not catch her in time.

But a sweet aroma washed over him, filling his nostrils, and taking the words out of his mouth. His patience, which he’d barely maintained until that moment, dissipated the second he breathed in the honeyed scent emanating from Yumi.

The woman closing her eyes in his arms wanted him. Just as he wanted her.

“Welcome home!”

“...I’m home.” It took everything he had to say those two words.

Zelaide had never been told “Welcome home” before.

When he reflected back on this night, he couldn’t quite remember his reaction. All he remembered was scooping Euphemia into his arms as she twined her arms around his neck, running inside the house, kicking the door shut, and flying up the stairs faster than a Bijour. He vaguely recalled Topsy circling over his head, joyfully yipping over his master’s return.

But those cries disappeared behind the door he kicked open.

The sweet scent drove him wild.

Zelaide’s room was mostly empty. There was a huge disparity between the empty room and the marvelous assortment of weapons lining the walls and hanging from the ceiling.

The echo of rain filled the room in place of furniture.

A bed with an exposed mattress sat in the center of the empty space. They fell onto the bed hugging. Neither wanted to part even an inch. Zelaide stole the lips Euphemia tilted up for him.

The Beast Blood had obtained his mate.

“Mmph!” Euphemia gasped for air, but the sound didn’t reach Zelaide.

He single-mindedly devoured her soft, pink lips. Zelaide drove his tongue between her parted lips and stroked hers.

This was a Beast Blood’s kiss—wild and instinctual.

Euphemia didn’t know how to react at first, but his passion was contagious, and she eagerly responded to it after the first kiss until she melted against him, a molten puddle of uselessness.

It continued to pour outside while they passionately welcomed each other in euphoric bliss after being separated for so long—they were once again in each other’s arms.

Zelaide's long, disheveled hair cascaded over Euphemia's cheeks. There was no time to breathe. She moaned as he pressed against her. His burly arms pulled her closer. She dipped her eyes lower, to the muscular expanse of his oaklike thighs.

His fingers traveled down to the hem of her loose, cotton dress and pulled it over her head in one smooth motion, exposing her skin to the cool night air.

"Zel—mm!"

She opened her mouth to talk but he sealed the words with a kiss.

Guiding her down onto the bed, Zelaide slid over her and laid claim to her mouth once more. They dueled with their tongues, thrusting and parrying.

Zelaide wondered what he needed to do to satisfy and fulfill her. Was there a method of loving that wouldn't break what he cared for most? He breathed against the place where her pulse throbbed at her neck. He nipped and sucked at the sensitive flesh. His hand cupped her buttocks. She let out a breathy sigh.

Euphemia was panting so heavily her head was in a daze, but she thought she heard a belt being unbuckled. She thought of the complicated silver belt buckle he always wore.

He can undo that with one hand? Her thoughts went to something unrelated, but things were moving so fast, her mind had a hard time keeping up.

The man who was always calm around her and always tried not to touch her was now possessed by such passion he embraced her. A piece of her wondered why that was. But even if there was no deep meaning behind it, she was all right with that.

Because I love him.

He slipped the last piece of clothing off her.

Euphemia shivered with embarrassment, but she didn't want to stop. Sure this wasn't the result of a romantic date night, but it was exciting and what she wanted.

He's finally looking at me.

Euphemia closed her eyes and reveled in the pain and bliss that came after.

They both believed in this blissful moment together and gave everything over.

Just this once. Please forgive me for loving you, Zelaide thought.

And, just like that, they became mates in body and soul.

TO Euphemia, even if this was only a one-night stand, she didn't have a single regret. Though she had no evidence to back it up, she was convinced that she was the first human woman Zelaide had ever slept with.

Euphemia took pride in that. And she hoped he would never again want for another woman, Beast Blood or human. She wanted to be the only woman for him for life.

That might be an unobtainable dream though.

In her eyes, the Beast Blood sleeping beside her looked incredibly youthful. She was young too, but his chiseled jawline, supple lips, stunning eyes, long eyelashes, and impeccable body were sure to attract all sorts of women over his much longer lifespan.

Why have so many left this handsome and innocent man alone? She wondered as her eyes lingered on his strong chest. But I don't want them to look at him! I want to be the only woman Zel wants... The only person he sees.

"Why are you crying, Yumi?"

Euphemia's eyes widened when his thick thumb rubbed her cheekbone. She hadn't even realized she was crying. Silver glowing eyes searched her face.

"You woke up, Zel?"

"How could I not wake up when you're cryin'? Did it hurt that bad...?" Zelaide reached out and rubbed her waist.

"No...it didn't. That's not it. You made me happy, Zel."

"Happy? You cry when you're happy?"

"I do. So make me cry some more, won't you?" Euphemia's emerald eyes wavered in the dull morning light.

"...Dammit!" Zelaide's brows drew together before he wrapped his arm around Euphemia and rolled her on top of him. "Please don't make that face... I don't know what to do."

"That's simple. Please stay with me forever. Also...if it's not too much to ask...I hope you won't go out with other woman... I know I'm being selfish."

"Go out? Go out with them where?" Zelaide asked, confused.

"Not like that. Going out with someone is human slang. Let me think of a better word...um...courtship? Dating? It means becoming a couple," she tried to explain.

"A couple...coupled together... Like being mates?"

"Well...I guess you could put it that way," Euphemia said, not really sure what being mates meant or entailed for Beast Bloods.

But I still can't reveal that Yumi's my mate yet. She'll be in even greater danger if the enemy learns that she's my lifeline. She sucks at lyin', so it's better if she doesn't know. We have to let the world think we're still just a client and bodyguard.

"Zel? Why are you scowling?"

Long white fingers trailed a path along Zelaide's forehead.

"Do you regret it? Sleeping with me," Euphemia asked softly.

"I do...and I don't. That's all I can say for now. But, Yumi, know this...I won't go out with other women."

"Really?" Euphemia peered down at the Beast Blood's chiseled face from atop his broad, rock-solid chest. Two silver glowing eyes were transfixed on her face.

"Really. So don't..."

"Don't what?"

"Don't look so pained."

Zelaide put his big hand behind Euphemia's head and pulled her in for another hot, passionate kiss.

Without thinking about anything else, Zelaide surged forward and made love with Euphemia after seeing her for the first time in over a week. He longed to see and feel her the entire time he was locked up. Every time he thought of her he couldn't sleep and was tortured by longing. The torture he had experienced during the day was easier to handle than the yearning.

Memories of her vividly filled his mind during the night, eating away at his mind and body. He had heard stories of Beast Bloods who died after being separated from their mates, and he realized this was why after experiencing it himself.

But even the torture of being apart was still sweet. After all, he believed all his desires would go away after embracing her once.

Go away? Ha. I've only become a thousand times more attached.

Bitter regret gnawed away at Zelaide.

Euphemia was now imprinted on his every cell. Now he could never be the one to leave her. He wanted to always keep her close enough he could reach out and feel her warmth and breath. Go out with another woman? Absurd. He was forever hers and hers alone.

This is...what it means to have a mate...

Zelaide embraced Euphemia as he recalled the ancient

instincts and memories existing in his genetics. He buried his nose in the nape of her neck. The thick scent of his mate filled his nostrils.

Yumi is mine. I'm Yumi's. I need to dedicate my all to her. I want to. My body, heart, mind, and life are hers.

†Chapter 5: Sweetness and Bitterness†

THE rain was drying up.

Warm, golden light shone in through the windows. Dawn was here.

The fulfilled man gazed lovingly upon the woman sleeping nestled against him. He quietly reached out and patted down her tousled hair. He never grew tired of running his fingers through those silken locks.

She had fallen sound asleep after they joined their bodies repeatedly throughout the night. Zelaide seemed to have slept a little afterward as well.

While Beast Bloods were heavy sleepers, they only slept in short bursts, so Euphemia was still in dreamland when he woke up. He had come home just past midnight, which meant they had been enjoying each other's company from the dead of night until first light. Zelaide had explored every detail of Euphemia's body and poured everything he had into pleasuring her.

I can't believe it's this different with her...

He sought things from a human woman he never desired from a Beast Blood, and greedily yet lovingly devoured what she offered up.

Even with her milky white skin basking in the early morning light, Euphemia didn't stir awake. Only her chest rose and fell with her deep breathing.

Zelaide's fingers traveled down her hair to her shoulder. Her skin was cold to the touch. Her body must have chilled after working up such a sweat before falling asleep.

She's gonna catch a cold. I need to cover her with somethin'.

Zelaide had never thought of covering someone with a blanket before. He looked around the room he only used for sleeping and changing.

Unfortunately, the stark room had neither a blanket nor anything useful right now. The room barely had any of the typical necessities. Even the mattress was exposed and stained from their

night together. Now he wished he at least had a fitted sheet. Things definitely couldn't go on like this now that he had a mate.

Zelaide quietly slid out of bed.

He felt refreshed, as if he had been cleansed from the inside out. The exhaustion and pain from his fierce battle with the Bijours was washed right out of his system.

Naked, he sauntered into the en suite bathroom. The bath was nice and bright thanks to the skylight. When he turned the faucet, hot, pressurized water poured out. Zelaide had never taken a bath before. Whenever he cleansed himself, he just took a hot shower. He didn't like soap either because of the strong aroma.

But after working up such a sweat, he wanted to warm Euphemia up. He set the bathtub control panel to automatically fill with warm water. The sound of hot water pouring into the tub drowned out the rain.

Zelaide decided to set up the bedroom next to his while the tub quickly filled. Euphemia's guestroom was too far from his and he no longer wanted any distance between them. None of the rooms were being used anyway, so it didn't matter which one he made hers.

The room beside the master bedroom was the same size and design with a bed in the center. Zelaide opened the closet and found the shelves packed with unopened bedding. He had never made a bed before, but he utilized the images on the packaging and followed the steps. He spread out the sheets so that there were no wrinkles, squeezed the edges, and hit the pillow to inflate it. The bed now looked just like the image on the back of the package.

Zelaide looked upon his handiwork and nodded. The hot water had filled the tub and automatically shut off by the time he finished. He returned to his room, scooped Euphemia into his arms, and carried her into the steamy bathroom illuminated by the golden light of dawn shining through the skylight.

He eased Euphemia into the hot water. Her eyes flickered.

"Hmm? What?" she asked groggily.

"It's okay. I just put you in the tub. Sleep."

But the bathtub was filled too high and Euphemia sank into the water, too tired to hold herself up.

"What am I gonna do with you?"

Still naked, Zelaide slid in behind Euphemia, keeping his hands on her shoulders to hold her up. It was a giant bathtub with

jets and temperature control, but the water spilled over the edges when he got in with her. Ripples spread over the clean, pale tiles.

"Zel...that's..." Euphemia turned her neck and looked at his chest. Red teeth marks stood out just under his clavicle from when she bit him in the heat of the moment.

"I'm sorry...really sorry. Why did I bite you so hard?" she sleepily muttered.

"I asked you to... You should've bitten me harder."

"But...but you're always putting your life on the line for me, Zel." Euphemia's face crumpled.

Numerous scars of various sizes vividly marred his tall body. Several were still fresh. They seemed to have only recently sealed and looked painfully red and purple. Euphemia had no way of knowing that he'd received those injuries fighting the Bijours. Between the new and old scars, there wasn't a single patch of skin that hadn't been cut open at some point.

"I know nothing...about how you got all these injuries..." Euphemia was crying. Her tears squeezed the Beast Blood's heart.

"Don't cry...okay? It's nothing. Doesn't hurt or itch. You don't have to worry 'bout a thing. Okay? Please stop cryin'," he pleaded with her. "Don't ya remember I said I don't know what to do with myself when you cry?"

"Zel...I love you..." Euphemia wrapped her arms around her love's neck and hugged him. His muscular arms gently enveloped her. "I love you so much."

"Yeah. I know. You've said it a lot."

"You don't have to love me, Zel, but is it all right if I love you?"

"Yeah. It is. Just let it go for now and sleep. I'll wash ya off," Zelaide said as he positioned Euphemia between his legs.

He rubbed the sweat and grime off her back with his big calloused hands instead of soap. Her golden locks floated on top of the water. He ran his fingers through it until the hair felt softer than a silk blanket. Euphemia comfortably rested against his chest and dozed off.

"Asleep already?" he quietly chuckled.

Zelaide, however, wasn't so comfortable. Bathed in the morning light, Euphemia looked like a radiant angel and it turned him on as he wiped her clean. Two round, plump mounds were right beneath his eyes, tempting him.

He instinctively swallowed the lump in his throat.

But he wasn't going to talk her into making love again when she was so tired. Left with little choice, he endured the temptation by getting out of the bath, wiping her down with a big towel, and carrying her to bed in the other room. He laid her down on the bed he'd made. Euphemia was only half-asleep while he was drying her off, but she was soon fast asleep under the blankets. Her safety assured, Zelaide threw on some clothes.

I need to feed her somethin' when she wakes up. Murakami fed me so I'm good. But has Yumi eaten? She seems like she's lost weight, and she spent the whole night makin' love with a guy like me, so she's burned a lotta energy.

When Zelaide entered the hallway, Topsy, who'd been locked out of the room, happily landed on his shoulder and tugged on his hair with his sharp beak.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll feed ya too, so don't get nippy."

As if he understood his master's words, the small pterosaur Muta took flight downstairs, leading the way to food. Zelaide followed him down.

The kitchen refrigerator was fully stocked with food when he opened the door. Zelaide didn't really understand how to use the stainless steel box he rarely peeked inside, but he knew it'd be stocked and maintained while he was away. While he knew what butter and milk were, he had no knowledge of how to cook fish and vegetables.

For now, he threw a ripe fruit to Topsy. The omnivorous Tipsilox swept down and perfectly caught the fruit in his beak. He immediately alighted on one end of the counter and started pecking at the fruit. Though the Muta would be content with just that, the human woman would not.

Grr. What do I cook her? Somethin' warm? What's good warm? I've often heard 'bout a sticky food called porridge bein' good...

Zelaide closed his eyes and rested his chin on his hands as he deliberated the hodgepodge of ingredients on the counter. Staring at the food would accomplish nothing but wasting time.



Oh yeah, that's what I have an IHT for.

Zelaide flipped on the IHT panel equipped to the kitchen wall and was bombarded with a wave of incoming email notifications. The majority were from Palmina. Going through them was too much of a pain, so he swiped them away and looked up porridge recipes.

What in the colony am I lookin' at?

Did he use the wrong search phrase? His results netted him rows and rows of unfamiliar food images and names. Getting a headache from scanning the screen, he randomly selected "Milk Porridge" and read how to make it.

"Easy-to-make, easy to digest, nutritious, etc." were written in the recipe's description, so Zelaide quickly pulled out the ingredients. Those were the keywords he was looking for. He found rice retort pouches in the cabinet. Luckily he had all the seasonings on hand too, so he grabbed the nearest pot, put it on the stove, clicked on the flame, and tossed in the ingredients. A delicious smell soon rose into the air. The only thing he had to watch out for was setting the heat too high. All that was left after that was adding in the milk and letting it boil for several minutes.

Seems like it's comin' together pretty well for my first go...

Contentment filled him as he looked down at the rice softening in the pot. The man who was never interested in cooking currently stood in the kitchen to make something for his mate to eat. He had a hard time believing it himself, but he didn't find it annoying to do something for his mate. He actually enjoyed it.

Or he did until his first cooking experience was unduly interrupted.

The IHT beeped. Someone had come to the house. Zelaide turned his eyes to the panel. Palmina's face showed on the entrance monitor.

Pal? What does she want?

He couldn't very well leave her out there, so he pressed the button to open the gates. Palmina carefully pulled into the driveway and parked in front of the gate. The front door swung open and he heard wet shoes pounding the floor. Topsy let out a piercing warning cry and flew off the counter.

"Zel! Why didn't you contact me if you're home?!" Palmina stormed into the kitchen nagging him.

“Sorry... Planned to do it later,” Zelaide said, keeping his voice down.

“Do you know how anxious I was when I heard you were arrested...?”

“Sorry. Don’t ask me ’bout it. I can’t tell ya.”

“B-But...as your agent I need to at least be informed of the general details... By the way, what are you doing?” Palmina finally realized that Zelaide was stirring food in a pot.

“Oh...this? Don’t worry ’bout it either.”

“I came at daybreak when your car’s GPS showed you were here. Can’t you please tell me a little bit about what happened?” she asked, a hint of desperation edging into her rising voice.

“...Fine. Stop being so loud though.”

You’ll wake her up.

Zelaide gave up on quickly getting rid of her and turned off the stove. His agent was standing in the living room dripping water from her hair, chin, and raincoat. The rains had ceased. Was she outside for a long time?

“Dry off.”

“I-I will, thank you.”

Palmina pulled a towel out of the cabinet, slipped off her raincoat, and dried her soaked hair. Under her coat she wore a black knit sweater and a tight black pencil skirt. Her clothes tended to be all black as if she were trying to match Zelaide’s style.

“What happened?” she asked as she hung her coat. “You were framed for murdering a prostitute, right? Did someone set you up?”

“Yeah, you can say that. I was set up good. The guy who set me up is lurkin’ somewhere within Yumi’s—Euphemia’s workplace. Lookin’ into it now. But they didn’t have ’nough evidence to hold me. So I’m free,” Zelaide briefly summed up. Palmina looked as though she was going to throw a hissy fit if he didn’t.

She saw his arm and shouted, “You’re badly injured! That looks fresh!”

“They can’t just release a Beast Blood under even the smallest suspicion of being a murderer for no reason, so I had to go along with the deal they cut me,” Zelaide explained, shrugging. The pain didn’t bother him anymore. “Meant workin’ for free. But it’s all good now. They pissed me off. I’ll get revenge for Manuela and protect Saionji’s sister.”

“How will you do that? You can’t look into the inner workings

of Biotech as an outsider.”

“A certain contact will give me the intel once they make progress. Besides, there’s somethin’ that bothers me. I can’t go ’round drawin’ attention to myself right after being set free, but I’ve got plans of my own.”

“And what are those?”

“.....”

“You won’t tell me, will you? You don’t trust me?”

“It’s not a matter of trust. I don’t want to get anybody else killed because of me,” Zelaide said in a low voice.

“Even though you let the mayor’s sister in?”

“.....”

“You called her...Yumi. I never thought the day would come when you’d call a human woman by a nickname... Could it be you...slept with her?” Palmina accused.

“None of your business.” Zelaide turned his back on her and grabbed a bottle of milk from the fridge.

“You slept with her. Now I know why you’re cooking.”

No longer seeing the need to answer her, Zelaide concentrated on measuring the right amount of milk.

“...Why? Why HER?!” Palmina suddenly shouted. Her screaming got even Zelaide to turn around. Slender arms coiled around his back. “Why did you pick a spoiled priss like her? I’ve loved you for so much longer...!”

“Oi...Pal—”

“I have loved you ever since the day I was still a novice agent and you stumbled into my office with wild eyes asking for work!” As she cried, Palmina noticed a white shadow hovering on top of the staircase behind the open kitchen. “Please look at me,” she cooed in a quieter voice, forcing Zelaide’s eyes down to her.

“Pal...stop this.”

“I won’t. Come to your senses. See reality. You just made a small, one-time mistake. I mean, that girl is the mayor’s younger sister and not the type to date a Beast Blood. You’re smart enough to know that.”

“.....”

“Aren’t I right? Sure, she’s a cute airhead and I’m sure she tempted you to dip your fingers, but she’s not right for you...”

“Oi!”

“Come on. Look at me,” Palmina coaxed, putting her hands

behind Zelaide's head and pressing her lips against his—fully aware that Euphemia was standing behind him.

“...Tch!” Zelaide jumped away from Palmina's kiss. “...What's your aim, Pal?” he growled.

“...Zel?”

The Beast Blood turned around in horror at the sound of that angelic voice. His eyes met square with wide emerald gems that were filled with confusion and sorrow.

“Yumi!”

She woke up?! How?! I didn't sense her!

“Miss...Palmina?” Euphemia looked past Zelaide to the woman behind him.

“Oh dear...I'm sorry for the show. It's been a while since we last saw each other; I just couldn't keep my hands off him...”

“Palmina!” Zelaide only used her full name when he was serious.

Entirely aware of that fact, Palmina still didn't let her calm façade slip. On the inside, she was in so much shock she felt like she had been hit by a car seeing Euphemia wearing Zelaide's shirt, the red marks on her neck, and the pink hue of her swollen lips. What went on in this house last night was obvious.

In that moment, she thought, *I want to kill this bitch. This is my man...he's mine! How dare she?! How dare she try to steal him from me?!*

However, as a woman used to living on a harsh frontier planet, Palmina didn't let her inner hatred show through her mask of propriety, she was a consummate professional after all. She maintained her last shred of dignity by sweeping back her disheveled hair.

“...Sorry, Zel. I wanted to make love with you right here and now, but I'll come back at a better time... I hope I didn't upset you too much either.” Palmina smiled sweetly at Zelaide and Euphemia and then brushed past them both. Hoping that the little harlot would be tortured by misunderstandings.

The front door slammed shut and an engine roared to life outside. The automatic gate slid open and Palmina drove away, leaving the two dense, young lovers behind.

“Yumi...” Zelaide started. “Pal is just someone I work with. Our relationship doesn't go beyond that.”

“...Aren't I just someone you work with too?” Euphemia threw

back at him.

"No! You are..." The words he should have said faded into silence without leaving his lips.

What good can come of me shoutin' that she's my mate? Zelaide bit his bottom lip. If I can't be with her for life, I don't want her to suffer more 'cause of me. I'm the only one who needs to feel miserable.

"I'm what?" Euphemia stared at the man she loved.

"...My companion."

"Your companion? What's that supposed to mean?"

Not even Zelaide understood what it meant. After all, it was the first word that came to mind. But now he had to paint over his true relationship with Euphemia with that makeshift lie.

"More than friends," he ventured.

"....."

"I haven't slept with her," he added.

Euphemia remained silent.

Whatever Zelaide did, whoever he made out with, Euphemia felt she had no right to chastise him for it. He was probably telling the truth when he said his relationship with Palmina was work-only. But that only applied to their relationship thus far. Judging by the way Palmina threw herself on him and acted around Euphemia, it was clear as day that she loved Zelaide. She treated Euphemia with the hatred of a love rival. Euphemia was a woman too, she could guess that much.

And it didn't help that Euphemia and Zelaide's relationship was going to end soon. At least officially.

Meanwhile, his relationship with Palmina was going to continue. No way was that woman going to quietly wait for him to make a move now. There was no mistaking that she was going to use whatever means necessary to make Zelaide look at her.

"I'm...leaving now. I promised Erica," Euphemia said feebly.

"....."

"But Erica hasn't lost faith in you just because you were frame. Part of why I was able to come to your house is because I made a huge fuss about it, but she would've never let me out of City Hall if she didn't you."

When Euphemia heard Zelaide was released, she pleaded with Erica to let her see him just once. She was hard-pressed thinking that everything would work out if she could only see him again.

She promised to follow every guideline and condition Erica

laid out. Erica contemplated it for a while before giving Euphemia permission under the condition that she didn't do anything alone and that she came back to City Hall by noon the next day. There might've been more scheming surrounding her sister's permission, but Euphemia was so desperate to see Zelaide that she became blind to everything else.

"A lot of guards are stationed outside. Should be safe," Zelaide said calmly.

He'd noticed the neighborhood and house were being heavily watched during his drive home. City Hall's exclusive Guardian force was on guard duty. They surrounded the house without leaving a single blind spot. They were the elite of the elite all right.

"I th-think the people who brought me stuck around..." she stuttered.

"I expected we'd be under surveillance. Doesn't matter how much you begged your sister, there's no way she'd let ya come here alone... Honestly, it's unbelievable she even gave you permission to come. Especially after all you've been through."

"Erica knows me well enough to realize she can't keep me locked up forever. I'll go along with her for the time being because the situation calls for it..."

"Ya don't seem to realize it, but I betrayed your sister's trust. I gave in to my desires and had sex with ya," Zelaide bitterly admitted.

Sadness filled Euphemia as she looked up at his pained face. "It's...what I wanted."

"No. I was weak. Can't be called a pro now!" Zelaide spat.

"Do you regret it?" she asked.

"I wouldn't worry so much if I did." Bitterness contorted every angle of his face.

"Good," Euphemia said with a slight smile.

"Nothing good 'bout it. Anyway, go back to your sister. Our contract period isn't up yet, and I'm still obligated to protect you, but the mayor isn't gonna care 'bout some contract after I got myself arrested."

"But I told Erica I would become bait! I know that there's a traitor at Biotech. This isn't just my personal problem, but an issue that threatens the safety of Gothic City! Think about it! Biotech contains more than just Muta. We have a large supply of Night Blooms that could be turned into Nightz, and countless pathogens.

It's crazy to involve citizens to threaten me and my sister," Euphemia huffed.

"I agree. But I'll be the bait. Your enemy and my enemy are connected. But ya can't be the bait, Yumi. Just go home for now."

Zelaide's instincts told him their enemy was extremely prideful and hated being made a fool. And most of all, this enemy believed they were in an unshakable position no matter what crime they committed.

Euphemia didn't seem to notice that even her reunion with Zelaide was just another piece of Erica's grand scheme. Granted, she probably didn't expect Zelaide to actually make love with her little sister. Or did she expect it and approve anyway?

Mayor Saionji, you even used your sister as chips on the betting table. Zelaide was disgusted with Erica's drive to do anything so long as she won.

The pervert who collected Zelaide's sperm from the breeding lab that night knew just what kind of relationship Zelaide and Euphemia had. Through their despicable peeping, they verified their relationship and went to the extent of killing Manuela to separate them.

In the end, they would be able to cut Mayor Saionji's credibility in half, overthrowing her as mayor once they forced her to take responsibility for hiring a murderous Beast Blood to protect her defiled younger sister. That was the nifty little scenario they seemed to be working toward.

But Erica poked holes in their plan and everything unraveled.

Sucks for you, creep. I was freed and am currently with Yumi. I can't undo goin' mad with love and having sex with my mate, but I can hope that provokes 'em more.

Come out, come out wherever you are. Go crazy with rage and show your true colors.

Erica probably intended to smoke out the enemy and force them to take action with this double provocation. Now that the die had been cast she wanted to quickly bring her precious family back under her wing.

"...Hey, Zel! Are you listening to me? I said I'm—" Euphemia pursed her lips at Zelaide for not looking at her. He had to avert his eyes from that adorable gesture.

"I'm listenin'. But haven't ya had 'nough? Stay put in City Hall for a while," he said gruffly.

"I'll be confined like sardines in a can again if I go back," Euphemia protested. "Erica told me not to go to work anymore... It's to the point now where she's even had my gerbils transported to City Hall so I can conduct my research there. She was able to negotiate with Biotech to make it happen after jumping through a lot of hoops..."

"That's big. You can work still. Be grateful to your sister."

"Biotech's president was really accommodating, surprisingly. Do you know him? His name is Murakami, but to be frank, he's not very popular at work. He's not a bad person, but he's always wandering around with his head in the clouds. Everyone says he's unreliable. Plus, his hair is thinning these days. Director Burhardt is waaay more capable."

"His hair..." Zelaide laughed under his breath.

Murakami, you've got quite the reputation goin' for ya. Zelaide sympathized with Murakami, but he also learned of his hidden talent through Euphemia's off-handed remark. Roaming around the facility looking incompetent was likely how he gathered information without anyone being the wiser.

"Director Burhardt is rumored as the most likely next president. Remember when we went to lunch with him? He's been so kind to a new researcher like me and has been extra considerate ever since I was first attacked by Vermi. Meanwhile, President Murakami didn't even say a word to me."

"Hmm, I see."

"Well, not that I care to talk to him either... Oh yeah, you met up with Wei too, right?" Euphemia asked, changing the topic.

"Yeah."

"What did you think of him?"

"Nothin' much. Don't have any interest in men. But thanks. You asked him to help me, right?"

"Yes. I don't have many friends...and I wanted to do whatever I could to help..." she muttered meekly. "I felt like I was going stir-crazy not doing anything."

"I..." *I felt the same way.* Zelaide balled the hand he instinctively reached out to touch her with.

Euphemia was deliberately dragging the conversation out.

She knew she shouldn't cause more problems for her sister than she already had. And also that she shouldn't go out right now. But knowing that didn't erase her desire to stay with Zelaide longer.

Sure she said she was leaving, but that was with the hope he'd ask her to stay.

Don't go—that's what she wanted to hear.

Euphemia wanted to fight this battle with him.

But he quickly dismissed her.

"Okay, you've stayed long 'nough. Get ready to go. The mayor made the right decision. Stay under your sister's protection for a while, Yumi. I'll get in touch with ya through her if anythin' happens. I'm not gonna let things end like this. I'll get 'em back whatever it takes."

"All right... But don't be reckless... I know saying it won't stop you, but I still need to. It hurts me to see you injured... Earlier was bad enough." Euphemia shivered from the memory of the fresh bruises and cuts marring his handsome body. "Don't get hurt anymore."

"I'm fine. Cuts don't hurt anymore. And anyway, you'd be doin' me a big favor by staying safe, Yumi."

Sadness seeped into Zelaide's heart seeing his mate worry over him.

But this is for the best.

Or at least that's what his head said. He decided to ignore his heart.

"Okay, fine...I'll be good. Will you see me home? Since I have to go back anyway."

"Yeah, sure. You have a whole entourage waitin' for ya, after all," Zelaide said with deliberate enthusiasm and shrugged.

His first attempt at cooking for someone ended in failure. This was what he got for doing something out of character. Euphemia not noticing the pot on the stove was his only saving grace.

"Say...Zel...do you like me...even a little?" Euphemia asked as her last act of resistance.

Zelaide scrunched up his face. Euphemia instantly regretted forcing him into that pained expression. She had asked a question she knew he wouldn't answer. How could she put him on the spot when she should've been satisfied he called her his companion?

The truth was that she was filled with ugly feelings that made her want to question him about Palmina and his mate, but she put a lid on her egocentric envy for his sake.

"...I'm sorry. I won't ask again..." she said in a threadbare voice.

“All I can say is that now is not the time to be thinking ’bout things like that.”

Tears glistened in the expressive eyes that looked up at him. Zelaide averted his eyes from her face before it awakened his desire again. She was irresistible. Such was a Beast Blood’s mate.

Aah, I wanna hug her. If I can’t hug her, I want to kiss her.

But even a hug would be the prelude to take-two of what happened last night. Zelaide was finally a free man. It wasn’t good for them to be together right now, no matter how difficult it was to be apart. He needed to devote his energies to securing her bright future.

“Zel? Why the scary face...?” Euphemia searched his face, worry filling her emerald eyes.

“My face is always scary,” he replied, subconsciously touching his taut cheek. There was a sharp gleam in his silver eyes.

Come and get me, ya cowards. I’ll take ya on.

“I’ll drive you... Go get your coat,” the Beast Blood said brusquely without looking at his mate.

†Chapter 6: Hope for Tomorrow†

CROSSBREEDING the Mongolian gerbils was proceeding smoothly.

The small rodents had grown in numbers exceeding three hundred and could no longer be contained in a single room on the top floor of City Hall. Biotech had delivered dozens cages and they were almost all full. Erica refused to enter the room where the little rodents squirmed about in the cages covering the walls from floor to ceiling.

Almost three weeks had passed since Zelaide drove Euphemia back to City Hall.

Crimes were frequently occurring throughout Gothic City. The growing number of Nightz addicts were starting fights left and right, the worst of which caused by a deranged young man who poured gasoline over his head and lit himself on fire to get more Nightz. The fire had spread from him to a nearby building, injuring several innocent citizens he trapped inside a building by blocking its entrance.

Robbery cases were on the rise too. On top of that, young members of Vermis were driving around Central Circle with modified cars acting like they owned the streets. There wasn't a day when the sound of sirens didn't fill the city.

"Dinner time, kids."

Euphemia dispensed Night Bloom seeds into each cage. The gerbils darted to the food. She mixed gerbil feed in with the seeds, but they lost interest in other food with each passing generation. Although the newest generation looked the same as the original, it was safe to say that selective breeding had taken place.

She couldn't go to work at the laboratory, but Ronaldo and Sonia reported similar results with their tests there. They were surprised and confused when they first learned that Euphemia suddenly couldn't come to work anymore, but after a certain point they stopped complaining. Surprisingly, they continued working seriously even without Euphemia there to breathe down their backs. Euphemia believed she had Burhardt to thank for that. Knowing

him, he must've been working in the background to support her.

"But I need to move things to the next phase soon," she muttered.

Euphemia wanted to conduct the crossbreeding experiment in a state as close to nature as possible, not in the laboratory. In other words, she wanted to take her experiment out of their cages and into an outdoor environment where she could let the gerbils loose. However, the only places allowed to legally cultivate Night Blooms were experimental farms regulated by laboratories.

Moreover, the Night Blooms which bloomed only once a year during a midsummer night, dropped their seeds two months after their petals fell off, which coincided perfectly with where Euphemia was at in her research. Things wouldn't come together this well again. But under the current circumstances she wouldn't be allowed back to Biotech, much less given the opportunity to ask where their secret Night Bloom research farm was located. The location was confidential to prevent criminals from raiding it.

"What to do? I know the experiment will work, but...where do Night Blooms grow naturally? Is there anywhere the syndicates haven't already taken over? But I can't go looking for it..." Euphemia was pondering out loud when Erica showed up out of the blue. "Erica? What's wrong?"

"I came to let you know that you can borrow space in one of Romanesque City's experimental farms," Erica said, offering rare support for Euphemia's research.

Euphemia hadn't seen Erica for three days.

Erica didn't complain, but she looked exhausted from running around trying to counteract the surge in crime. Euphemia made a point of not sticking her nose into her sister's work. But even after losing some weight and having circles under her eyes from days of intense work, Erica looked stunning in her black suit, her hair neatly coiffured.

"What? Really?!"

"Yes, really. Their farm is located inside the city though. Mr. Haydn spoke on your behalf. It seems he took an interest in your gerbil research. He asked me lots of questions about it. He pulled some strings to make it possible for you to continue your research there," Erica explained.

Romanesque City was the second largest city on the planet, and though it had a smaller population than Gothic City, it boasted

more space and a more relaxed environment for its citizens.

“Mister Haydn pulled strings for me?” Euphemia asked, doubt creeping into her voice. “Can we trust him? Isn’t he your political adversary? You’re rivals.”

“We are two people with different opinions working in the same field. He has several companies in Romanesque City, which gives him more influence there than me. Besides, he insists his support for your research has nothing to do with politics. What do you think? Would you like to go?” Erica asked.

“Can I go?” Euphemia jumped on the opportunity dangled in front of her. “Then I’ll call Zel and ask him to drive me—”

“You can’t involve him. Do you want a repeat of last time?” Erica shook her head.

“Then how am I supposed to get there...?”

“I’ll send you by helicopter.”

“You’re going to use a helicopter just for my research?” Euphemia asked in disbelief.

“I won’t use public funds just for your research,” Erica coolly dismissed the notion. “I scheduled that helicopter to deliver medical equipment Romanesque Hospital put in an official request for. A total of six people can board it along with the equipment. I’m sending Guardians with you as well.”

“Is it really not possible to bring Zel along? We shouldn’t have the same problems going by helicopter.”

Zelaide had sent several messages since he drove her back to City Hall, but they hadn’t seen each other again. Euphemia counted all the sleepless nights she stayed up late thinking of that hot, passionate night they spent together.

Doesn’t he want to see me too? That thought plagued her. His messages were always short and infrequent.

“It’s really impossible. His agent has been strongly demanding that I release him from his contract if he isn’t going to be on the clock protecting you. He is also currently on the trail of the murderer responsible for the prostitute’s death,” Erica explained clerically.

“No one told me that...”

His agent was Palmina. There wasn’t much time left on their three-month contract, but it was evident Palmina wanted to terminate the contract with Erica. Knowing her, she probably said she was willing to pay any penalty fee for early termination.

She's that desperate to pull Zelaide apart from me. Euphemia gnawed on her lip.

Erica watched her younger sister with mixed emotions. She had her own thoughts about their relationship.

"...He knew you would worry about him. Or worse: that you'd offer to help him. He's smart."

"I'm a nuisance, in other words."

"Oh, you're self-aware." Erica mercilessly confronted her depressed sister with the cold-hard truth.

"...It's fine. I'm going straight to see him once I take care of things on my side."

"You are hopeless... Think about how he feels for once..." Erica sighed.

"Erica? Does that mean you're keeping in touch with Zel?" Euphemia was unusually quick to pick up on what was between the lines this time. She searched her sister's face.

"I am."

"What is he doing right now?" Euphemia asked.

"Didn't you hear what I just said? He's probably taking action using information only Beast Bloods have access to. He stands out wherever he goes, so it seems there are a lot of obstacles getting in his way... I don't know much more than that."

"I see... Then I need to do everything I can on my end! When does the helicopter leave?"

"The day after tomorrow. I'll send bodyguards with you, but you have to conduct your research on your own. Can you do it?"

"I'll make it happen," Euphemia declared, looking over her shoulder at the wall covered in cages. Hundreds of little rodent eyes watched the sisters with curiosity.

"It's almost time for your debut, my cute little gerbils. Squeak," Euphemia said, imitating the gerbils.

"Stop that. I don't want a gerbil for a sister," Erica emphasized, her eyes darting away from the gerbils. The room was filled with high-pitched squeaks, happy purrs, aggressive squeaks, chattering sounds, chirping, yipping, and loud thumping. She couldn't wait for her residence to be free of them.

THUD!

A dull thud reminiscent of hitting a mattress resounded through the dark space.

Kicked by a heavy boot, the man crashed into the stained, concrete wall and slid onto the ground. The only reason he didn't lose consciousness was because his training taught him to curl his body—and because the man beating him held back.

"Ghhhh...!" Coughing up blood, the man glared at the shadow towering in the dark.

He had put up a good fight, but the difference in power was evident. Guns and weapons made unusable during their skirmish littered the filthy floor. All the skillful techniques that he unleashed one after another were slapped aside by his opponent.

Murky darkness hovered over their makeshift battleground. This was an abandoned underground warehouse located in an especially dangerous section of Out Circle.

The shadow moved and the man cowered. He assumed he wouldn't be killed as long as he didn't speak first. But he highly doubted he'd make it out with all five limbs. Fear started to eat away at him. The inside of his mouth was dry and sticky.

"Feel like talkin' yet? I know ya were hanging 'round Manuela's place. Worked my ass off to get that bit of info. Ya fancy gentlemen can disguise yerselves all ya want—don't make a difference. Don't underestimate our ability to sniff ya out. Ya'll have an easier time the sooner ya squeal," Zelaide advised, purposefully slipping into slang and a more laidback tone.

The man wouldn't even look him in the eye. Zelaide crouched and grabbed the man by the collar of his fancy suit. The collar had a label from a popular sports team. The man was a famous amateur boxer—and a member of Infernum.

"Who asked ya to do it? Who didja report back to? ...Say it." Zelaide switched from requesting in a friendly tone to demanding with ice in his voice. A murderous light gleamed in the Beast Blood's eyes.

"Dunno. I'm just a sportsman. Don't lump me in with you beasts," the man egged him on, despite the situation he was in.

"Beast? I can't deny that one. I'm as beastly as they come. But what does that make ya? Why does some classy sportsman have somethin' like this built into his shoe?"

Zelaide picked up the shoe that had slid off the man's foot and

slammed the toe box into the wall next to his face. A small but sharp blade popped out of the heel. It was a spring loaded shoe knife. The blade was tiny but shimmered with some sort of liquid, probably poison. Taking a back kick or heel drop from it would be fatal.

The man seemed to be an inexperienced Inferni. He trembled, his eyes darting away from Zelaide's face.

Zelaide whistled. "Some fine workmanship right here. Not many shoemakers can make somethin' of this quality. I can hunt 'em down and get my intel from there. So how'd ya like me to test out this pretty blade on your flesh? There's a sayin' from the old world that scars make the man. It'll look cool. See?"

Zelaide held the man up by his throat as he spoke. His legs trembled in vain as his toes merely swept through the air without touching the ground. The Beast Blood sneered wickedly and pressed the small blade, shoe still attached, to the man's face.

This wasn't Manuela's killer, but he was involved in her death. Carefully digging into every shred of reliable information he could find for days netted him this tidbit. Did the killer use him because they knew someone who didn't frequent these parts would have a harder time blending in? Zelaide had finally hunted him down after he quit the boxing club and disappeared.

"I wouldn't squirm if I were ya. The blade'll cut into ya. Hmm... I smell lyunone on ya," Zelaide said, sniffing the air. "Somebody once sent me a box of the stuff."

Lyunone was a deadly poison that targeted the nervous system. Zelaide had yelled at Euphemia around the time they first met because she stupidly tried to pick up the box filled with it. That happened just two and a half months ago. It felt like a lifetime to Zelaide.

"Ya've been after me all along... Ya even had to drag her into it..." Zelaide growled, his voice gruffer than a shovel dragged through gravel. "Say it!"

The Beast Blood's fury suddenly burst forward. Because of the lack of light, his eyes glowed as if they were burning balls of silver light. Even the man who spent his whole life despising Beast Bloods found those eyes bewitching.

"Tell me or feel this blade sink into your neck!"

Pure anger emitted from the Beast Blood's body. It was an invisible pressure given off by something inhuman. The amateur

boxer felt like he was exposed to an open fire. His face, which had been a hard mask, distorted with terror.

"Eek..." his voice cracked like a creaky fence. He no longer counted as prey worth fighting. "D-Don't! I-I'll tell you! I'll tell you, so don't eat me!" he cried.

"...Who killed Manuela?"

"Shank did... I was just the guide and the lookout!"

"Shank? Who's that? Where is he?"

"Nobody knows. Came as soon as I let them know you dropped by her place," the boxer squealed.

"How soon was that?" Zelaide asked.

"Thirty...no, forty minutes, give or take... I contacted Shank as soon as I saw you at her door."

Forty minutes.

That was an odd amount of time. It was plenty of time to get there from City Hall, and if they floored it, they could get to her place from the laboratory with time to spare.

"Did ya talk to Shank?" Zelaide asked.

"No. I got a text on my IHT telling me to leave first. Must've been close by the time I contacted them. Shank always gives orders by IHT text. The pay is amazing, but...if you fail or betray...you're dead."

"Hmm... Do ya know a man named Danny?" Zelaide changed the topic. "He was killed two months ago."

"D-Don't know him. He's not...affiliated with my group."

"Heh...that's not good 'nough. My hand might slip if ya don't share more, y'know?" Zelaide threatened, pressing the sharp blade against his cheek so that it dented the skin without piercing it.

"S-Stop! Please don't! I'll die!" Sweat trickling from his face wet Zelaide's hand on his throat.

"Shank is a man! His voice doesn't sound young. Not like an old man either. He's thin, has a small head, and is...always wearing thick specs... Seemed to be in a poorly lit empty room that was shaped like a box. That's about all I could tell from the video chat... O-Oh and..." The boxer paused as he tried to remember what he noticed about Shank. "...I think his specs had a different thickness on the right side."

"Huh?"

His specs have a different thickness on one side? That's random. Zelaide cocked his head. *What does it mean?*

Zelaide punched the man in the stomach and squeezed his neck. He instantly lost consciousness. He chucked him on the floor and left the filthy warehouse without looking back.

Zelaide hadn't gone back home since escorting Euphemia to City Hall more than two weeks ago.

Hundreds of messages bombarded his screen when he pulled out his IHT. Most of them were from Palmina, but Euphemia sent him a message a day. Her messages were always short.

"Don't be reckless. I'm okay. Please contact me when you can."

Enduring the ache in his heart, the Beast Blood melted into the crowds Downtown.

†††

"**WOW...** Wow!" Euphemia jumped with excitement.

The experimental farm spreading before her was about the size of four tennis courts put together. This was the space Euphemia was allocated to conduct the next stage in her research. The hundred gerbils she released eagerly ate the Night Bloom seeds growing on the tips of the wilted leaf stems.

This was a one-time opportunity given to Euphemia by courtesy of Romanesque City. She was in charge of this vast plot of land.

The farm grounds were fabricated to be as close to nature as possible, but the area was surrounded by an electrified transparent acrylic fence to prevent lab animals from escaping. If they did escape, it'd pose a direct threat to the luxury villas built next to the research facility for researchers who wanted to live near work.

Romanesque City Research Institute attracted many researchers because it was located in a scenic location on the outskirts of the city and offered luxury housing.

"They're eating...and only eating Night Bloom seeds!" Euphemia exclaimed, clapping her hands.

Even though the ground was sown with other grains, nuts, and bread, the little rodents didn't look at it, they greedily devoured just the Night Bloom seeds. They nibbled through the fibrous fruit until they pulled the seeds out and then they bit and tore into the seed pod to get at the germ. A single gerbil didn't stop at one fruit—they typically consumed two or three fruits the same size as their body.

Each fruit contained four to five seeds. Nightz was produced by mashing those seeds, but these gerbils gladly devoured that part in full. Their fluffy little cheek pouches were stuffed.

“Holy Muta... I thought I was prepared for what this would look like after seeing them in the lab, but it’s something else entirely to see the experiment taking place on this scale... I’m getting chills just looking at the carnivorous little monsters,” Ronaldo muttered as he filmed the farm with a camcorder.

He had boarded the helicopter with Euphemia to record her findings. “I once read an old document about the famines caused by wheat being wiped out in one region because of a large number of wild mice and rats. After seeing this, I know how it happened. Feels like I’m watching history in the making.”

Euphemia was filled with pride.

She was certain that Biotech’s board members would grant her a bigger budget after seeing this video footage she was going to include in her next report. Her experiment might be ready to put into practice in the wild already. To make that happen, she needed to increase the area covered and the number of gerbils used.

By collaborating with the police and Guardians, she could gather information on where hidden Night Bloom farms were located and secretly release the gerbils into them. All of this research had the potential to get rid of Night Blooms without harming anyone. This was a much safer approach to drug removal, as the Crime and Drug Unit had been shot down in the past by criminals when they tried to spray a highly toxic herbicide on Night Bloom fields with a helicopter.

Gerbils would hungrily move toward where their food supply was located. Mankind had struggled to rid fields of rodents in the past. This time wouldn’t be any different.

By releasing only male gerbils, they could prevent them from overbreeding in the wild and reduce the strain on the ecosystem. This was a very effective strategy, because if the illegal farmers tried to exterminate the gerbils with toxic chemicals, their precious Night Blooms would wilt in the process.

“Looks like the experiment was a success.”

The researcher assigned by Romanesque City Research Institute smiled. At Erica’s request they had shared one of their experimental farms with Euphemia and assigned a few of their researchers to assist her.

"Thank you. I couldn't have done it without your assistance," Euphemia thanked them from the bottom of her heart.

This definitely wasn't a result she could have achieved alone. Erica's influence played a big part in giving Euphemia the right connections, and Euphemia was grateful for that. She was going to make use of whatever she could if it meant eradicating Nightz from the world and bringing a modicum of peace to the cities.

"We didn't have enough gerbils for this experiment, so we conducted it with males and females in the field, but I plan to conduct separate gender experiments by next year. We are working toward introducing them into the Wilds the year after next," Euphemia explained with professional pride.

She held back her excitement in order to calmly share her plans in the way she expected a head researcher might. While she could control her tone, she couldn't stop her cheeks from flushing with anticipation.

"Yup, yup. And once we get our method patented, we're going to get married, right?" Ronaldo put his arm around Euphemia's shoulder. He had volunteered to come with her to Romanesque City. Now she knew why.

"Hey! Don't make stupid jokes. Oh no! You recorded that dumb comment just now, didn't you? Make sure you edit it out later!" Euphemia demanded, skirting out of his embrace.

"You really should be more honest. My honey is such a shy girl."

"Who are you calling honey?!"

"I'm envious of how well you get along," Romanesque City's researcher said with a laugh.

"We do not get along!" Euphemia objected.

"It's so nice to be young and in love," the researcher said with a good-natured smile, entirely misunderstanding their relationship.

In any event, the experiment went well, and Euphemia's first objective had been achieved. Rounding up the gerbils was going to be difficult, but they would go back to their nests once they ran out of food. That was their natural instinct.

"It's lively out here."

Ziggurat Haydn, a member of Gothic City's senate and owner of many businesses including a TV studio, got out of a black luxury car.

"Senator Haydn!"

Ronaldo was ecstatic to be in the presence of an influential senator and famous businessman. The researcher from Romanesque City was just as delighted by Senator Haydn's surprise visit. Euphemia was surprised he came too. She was able to borrow this experimental farm through his connections, but the date and time were worked out with one of his secretaries. It was unexpected for the busy senator to check on things personally.

"Thank you for coming all this way. The experiment was a success! Might I ask why you are here? I hadn't heard you were coming. If I'd known you were, I would have prepared a presentation," Euphemia politely addressed her sister's political adversary.

"It's a complete coincidence. The business I was supposed to attend to in this area was suddenly canceled, so I decided to look in on how things were going with my newfound free time. I have a vacation home in this city and decided to take a few days off to relax there. I haven't taken a day off in over half a year. I shouldn't get in trouble for enjoying some time off, right?" Haydn asked with a wry smile.

He had every right to some vacation time. Ziggurat Haydn was renowned for his energetic personality, which seemed like a complete contradiction given his skinny and withdrawn appearance.

"You deserve time off," Euphemia responded. "You decided to spend it here?"

"Well, I won't be completely free of my work, but I can spend a little time here," Haydn said as he looked around the farm.

Romanesque City was a half-day drive north of Gothic City. It was more open than Gothic City, and the north side of the city was surrounded by a stunning mountain range which brought it closer to nature.

"From the look on your face, I take it that the experiment went off better than expected? Your face is glowing, Euphemia." Haydn smiled as he stared at Euphemia. "I have no doubt that this experiment will be a sure step toward eradicating Nightz."

"I couldn't have made it this far without you putting in a good word for me, Senator Haydn. Thank you very much," Euphemia responded to his praise with the appropriate level of gratitude.

"I'm glad to have been of service. You have my continued support."

"That's encouraging."

Though Haydn was smiling, the way he quirked his lips and the shadowed gleam in his eyes made Euphemia feel like he was secretly mocking her. Something in her gut told her that this man who was a famous celebrity to the rest of the world wasn't as easy to get along with as he might seem at first.

Haydn had also pledged to crack down on crime as a part of his political campaign. He sought to revise existing laws and impose heavy offenses on criminals. And he publicly declared that Beast Bloods needed to be controlled by humans from the time of their birth. He repeatedly criticized Erica's humanitarian policies for being lukewarm and flimsy. His stances were clear and straightforward, and he was a popular politician with the upper and middle classes. He wasn't considered the most likely candidate for mayor for nothing.

From the perspective of a man like Haydn, ridding the world of Nightz through the use of rodents must have looked like foolish child's play. Euphemia sensed he was only praising her work because he was a mature adult and a politician.

Why did this old man suddenly show up without contacting me first? Did he come to tease me? Trying to dig up material to ridicule Erica with? That seems like the most likely reason, Euphemia thought, never letting her ire crack through her polished smile.

"Is all your passion reserved only for these rodents?" Haydn asked.

"Yes, it is. That passion is what has driven my research near practical application," Euphemia stated, not taking his bait.

"I hope your sister can last long enough for that to happen," he said quietly enough only Euphemia could hear him.

"...Is that supposed to be a threat? Or are you just being rude?" Euphemia asked in an equally low, tempered voice.

"Ooh, the gleam in your eyes is magnificent... But you're ruining that pretty face of yours with your anger, Euphemia. Did you know that? Ah, but your anger has its own appeal... Oh dear, what I just said counts as harassment, doesn't it? I certainly am being rude. I accidentally said too much. I should apologize to your sister too." Haydn was so sure of himself he easily spoke over Euphemia's complaints as she cocked an irked eyebrow at him. "All I was saying is that your sister's term is almost up. I meant no ill will by it."

"My sister is running in the next election."

“Oh, of course she is. Anyone can run for election. Mayor Saionji is especially popular with the masses.” His way of speaking made it clear that he didn’t think Erica had any talent. “Setting aside politics, might I ask you something, Euphemia?” he asked, suddenly changing the topic.

“What?” Euphemia retorted in a barbed voice, feeling disgusted every time Haydn used her name. She wanted nothing more than to get far away from him as soon as possible.

“I know you have to clean up after this, but how would you like to join me for dinner after that?”

“Excuse me...?” Euphemia was confused by the sudden dinner invitation.

What should the younger sister of a politician do when she’s invited to eat with a political rival?

Haydn was an influential man, but not someone who was fun to talk to. Joining him for dinner would be even less enjoyable. But curtly rejecting his offer might come back to bite her later. After all, it was thanks to him that Euphemia was finally able to conduct the experiment she had been dying to do. She also didn’t want him going around saying that Saionji’s sister lacked the manners to reciprocate a favor.

Well, not like anything bad can happen over dinner. I’ll gratefully let him treat me and end the night with a single thank you. I’m dealing with an adult here, and one who is a famous politician and businessman. I’m sure he’ll bring me to some expensive restaurant and will have private security with him.

Euphemia made up her mind. She crafted a sweet smile that usually went over well with men. “...I wouldn’t mind joining you. It’s an honor to be invited. But I am supposed to leave Romanesque City just past eight, so I unfortunately won’t be able to join you for a five-course meal. I will also have to be accompanied by my bodyguards. If those conditions don’t bother you, then we can dine together.”

“I am happy to abide by your conditions. My company helicopter is scheduled to leave at ten. You can go home using it instead,” Haydn offered, increasing the amount of time he would have with her. “If you’re worried, I will gladly contact your sister and explain the situation. Don’t worry. Mayor Saionji and I are politically at odds, but we do trust each other.”

“Is that so? Then please do speak with her first. I have other

matters to attend to right now, so if you will excuse me.”

Euphemia believed she could suck it up and handle being with Haydn for two hours. It was a younger sister’s job to wiggle into the good graces of her older sister’s bitter enemies and improve their overall relationship when opportunities such as this arose. She just needed to send Erica a message when she got the chance.

“I will reserve a restaurant with outstanding food and night views,” Haydn promised.

“I look forward to it.”

“Can I come too?” Ronaldo asked as soon as it was settled they would eat out. He was a man who butted in whenever the opportunity presented itself.

“The more the merrier. Let’s enjoy an evening flight after dinner. It will be the perfect time to enjoy the night scenery. You will be able to return to Gothic City just before midnight.”

“That sounds wonderful!” Euphemia didn’t have any complaints as far as that was concerned.

She had never experienced flying in a helicopter at night before. Viewing the world’s nighttime scenery from above was a unique experience few had the opportunity to enjoy. There was a high chance that Zelaide hadn’t done it before either.

It’ll give me something fun to tell him about. Euphemia was delighted by the prospect. Now his invitation had become something she could enjoy for herself, which made her start to think that Haydn might not actually be such a bad guy after all.

“But what matters do you have to attend to before this evening? Didn’t you already wrap up your experiment here?” Haydn asked Euphemia now that she was smiling.

“I did,” Euphemia answered honestly. “I have never left Gothic City before, so I want to make the most of my time in this city. There’s someone who lives here that I have always wanted to meet and I’m going to use this chance to do so. He’s a little-known researcher, but I heard he is very familiar with Night Blooms and the animals that live around it in the Wilds. I’ve already made an appointment to see him.”

“...A Night Blooms researcher? Might ask his name?” Haydn asked, intrigued.

“His name is Maurice DeLay. I learned about him while reading through some of his biology findings. He was the first person to come up with an alternative solution to the Night Bloom

problem by introducing fruitless Night Blooms into the Wilds,” Euphemia explained.

“Oh? Night Blooms wouldn’t be able to bear fruit anymore?”

“Yes, if he had succeeded. But he suddenly retired from the institute and continued his research in private. I don’t know why though. I was surprised because it happened so suddenly.”

“But if he successfully implements his research, your precious rodents will starve to death,” Haydn said, feigning concern.

“I don’t think so. Night Bloom seeds aren’t that easy to destroy. Even if the numbers are temporarily reduced, the roots are tenacious enough to find a way to adapt and survive. Evolution is like that. Unless humans intervene, nature will take care of itself.”

“...You believe in evolution?”

“Yes, I do. I know saying this will offend you, Mister Haydn, but I believe that the people we call Beast Bloods are at the top of the evolutionary food chain,” Euphemia said, speaking of what she hoped and dreamed was true.

Everything that lived continued to evolve and adapt in order to survive. Recently, Euphemia started to think that Beast Bloods were the next phase in evolution for humanity.

They lived longer, were stronger, and prettier than humans. Weren’t they the ideal next step for humanity?

However, it seemed like they were still evolving. They did live on this planet long before humanity showed up, so their evolution might diverge from the humans who colonized it. One thing was clear: they were not enemies of humanity. Humanity’s greatest enemy still remained humanity itself.

“...I see. That’s very fascinating. Dinner with you seems like it will turn out to be very informative. Please come to my company’s lobby at 7 PM... I look forward to our time together, Euphemia,” Haydn said, lifting Euphemia’s hand to his lips and kissing it.

†††

“**AM** I right to assume that you are the Miss Euphemia Ashencourt who reached out to me?”

The man who opened the door welcomed Euphemia and Ronaldo inside with a friendly smile. He appeared to be in his forties with streaks of white through his black hair. His smile was

youthful, and boyish curiosity twinkled in the eyes hidden behind his round-rimmed specs.

This was Maurice DeLay.

He was a botanist who had been studying Night Blooms for many years, and the man who had taken the scientific community by storm when he succeeded in producing a seedless and fruitless strain last year. However, he suddenly quit his job after that, and was currently concentrating all his efforts into cultivating the next generation of that strain as a private researcher unaffiliated with any of the major research institutes.

He was the researcher Euphemia admired and respected most.

“Yes, that’s me. Thank you so much for accepting my unreasonable request.”

After learning that he lived in Romanesque City, meeting with Maurice became Euphemia’s secondary objective after conducting the Mongolian gerbil experiment.

Maurice showed her into a homey living room and she settled into the couch he directed her to. The Guardians assigned to her were stationed outside the house, while Ronaldo, who needed his way into joining her under the condition that he wouldn’t utter a word during the meeting, sat quietly beside her on the couch.

“I read your research paper inside and out until the letters nearly burned into my IHT screen, Dr. DeLay.”

Euphemia earnestly appealed to Maurice as he sat down directly across from her and studied her face. There was a slight upward tilt to his lips she took as a smile.

Euphemia had changed from her lab clothes into a professional skirt suit and combed out her hair so that it fell neatly down her back in a straight wave. She had been dressing like a slob since she was confined within City Hall, but she put extra effort into her looks for this meeting.

And yet boyish amusement twinkled in Maurice’s olive-brown eyes. Euphemia was starting to feel uncomfortable. Did she wear the wrong clothes? Did she smell too much like the gerbils?

Would a pant suit have been more appropriate than a skirt for a meeting between scientists?

“I’m sorry, have I done something to offend you?” Euphemia asked, anxiety needling away at her.

“Oh no, I’m the one who is sorry. I shouldn’t have been staring so much. I had a general idea of your looks from your profile

picture, but I didn't expect such a young woman... Forgive me. So you are trying to combat Nightz by using Mongolian gerbils, correct?"

"Yes, I am. I just finished conducting a fairly large-scale experiment at one of the experimental farms here."

"Did you? How did it go?"

"It was a huge success...or at least I like to think so."

Euphemia spoke in-depth to Maurice about the results of that morning's experiment. His eyes sparkled as he listened to the outcome. He occasionally asked questions throughout her explanation.

"Marvelous... You seem like an incredibly talented and proactive researcher. I'm glad to know the research world has such dependable young people joining it."

"Aw gee, you flatter us."

"Thank you very much. It is a huge honor to be told that by a veteran in the same field," Euphemia responded as she glared out of the corner of her eye at Ronaldo for his frivolous remark, shutting him up.

"I'm no one special. I have only devoted my life to nothing but Night Bloom research...so I am thrilled to hear about other researchers who are challenging the Nightz problem from a different angle," Maurice said with a smile.

"....."

"I am even more surprised such huge strides have been made by such a young and pretty lady as yourself."

"...Um...thank you?" Euphemia turned tomato-red. She was used to people complimenting her looks, but she didn't sense any of the typical flirtatiousness or double-meaning in Maurice's words, so they meant more. "Y-You are too kind."

The door suddenly flew open and a large and tall woman barged in. She held a tray with cups on one hand, but her eyes latched on to Euphemia like a wolf sizing up an opponent. A long scar ran from her hairline straight through her left eye. She gave off such an overwhelming aura that Ronaldo stiffened in the couch next to Euphemia.

"H-Hello. I apologize for the intrusion," Euphemia politely greeted the woman though she was surprised by the look she was receiving.

The women merely gave a slight nod, noisily carried the

clattering tray over to the table, plopped it down with a clang, and straightened up without uttering a single word.

“...This is my wife, Arelia. I’m sorry for the discomfort. She is the silent type,” Maurice explained, trying to smooth over the awkwardness.

“Oh! I didn’t know you were married. Hello, Arelia. My name is Euphemia Ashencourt. I am a biologist like your husband. I came to your home today to discuss my research with Dr. DeLay...” Euphemia’s words trailed off like a puff of smoke.

The tall woman had crossed the room in two strides, climbed on top of Maurice on the chair, wrapped her arms around his neck, and buried her face into his shoulder entirely out of the blue.

“Wah! Arelia! Stop that. You’ve startled our guests!”

Arelia latched on to her much smaller husband and wouldn’t let go. She seemed much stronger and all of Maurice’s struggling and flailing to pry her off ended in vain. She pushed her voluptuous chest against Maurice’s face, suffocating him, as she glared hostilely at Euphemia over her shoulder.



"Mmph! Stop it, Arelia! Enough is enough! I have no physical interest in this woman, my interest is purely intellectual," Maurice stressed, managing to break free of his wife's iron grip.

Arelia reluctantly freed her husband who was gasping for air.

Euphemia and Ronaldo froze in their chairs, stunned by that public display of affection.

"I'm so sorry. She's...well...a tad on the jealous side. Take that!" Maurice stretched up in his chair and bonked his forehead against his wife's. He didn't seem the least bit annoyed by her clinginess.

It was a sweet display of love between a married couple and through it Euphemia noticed something. Arelia's eyes glowed for a whole second while her face was shadowed by Maurice's.

"Ah! Excuse me! Is it possible that your...wife...is a Beast Blood?" she asked.

"Seriously?!" Ronaldo exclaimed.

"Pardon me?" Maurice responded in shock.

"P-Please don't be offended! It's just that...I have a Beast Blood friend...and she reminded me of him is all... I'm sorry if I'm wrong..." Euphemia's voice grew smaller as she spoke. She feared she had pried too deep.

Arelia's eyes took on a sharper gleam.

"Um...I'm sorry," she apologized again.

"No, you aren't mistaken. Arelia is a Beast Blood," Maurice replied while searching Euphemia's eyes.

Ronaldo's expression was unusually tense.

"But how could you tell? From her stature?" Maurice inquired.

"No... I noticed her eyes glowing for a second when her face was shadowed by you... My friend's eyes also glow beautifully in the dark."

"Ahh, that's how you guessed it. You weren't afraid when you first saw your friend's eyes?"

"Afraid? Not at all. I mean, he's so handsome, strong, and kind... Why would I be?" Euphemia recalled those teal eyes that glowed silver in the dark. And then her thoughts led her to another possibility. "Excuse me for asking, but might you and Arelia be... mates?"

"Yes...we are mates," Maurice immediately confirmed her abrupt question. "I see you even know that term."

“And you’re married?”

“We sure are. Married and mates. Fortunately, if that’s the right word, Arelia’s parents are both human. Genuine Homo sapiens. In other words, she was the result of a random genetic mutation. That’s why she has a birth certificate. Most Beast Bloods don’t. We are mates and a married couple,” Maurice repeated, helping Euphemia digest that piece of information.

“...I see.”

Beast Bloods were said to be the survivors of the indigenous species living on this planet before human colonists arrived.

Ancient records kept by the colonists described how the native people gradually declined and died off as a direct result of humans reproducing at a faster rate and the sheer difference in their technological prowess. However, the genetics they left behind while intermarrying with humans for centuries never disappeared from the gene pool. They survived deep within the people who colonized this planet and occasionally resurfaced. Beast Blood was the name given to children who shared those genes.

Beast Bloods looked similar to humans, but they tended to be taller, larger, stronger, and physically gifted. The greatest trait used to distinguish them from humans was their irises that glow in the dark.

Beast Bloods were the reoccurrence of a species thought lost to the cruel passage of time and colonization.

“My friend said there’s no record of his birth...” Euphemia said, thinking of Zelaide.

“Then both of his parents must have been Beast Bloods... Beast Bloods tend to despise reading and writing, so they rarely leave any records behind.”

Once Maurice mentioned it, Euphemia realized she had rarely seen Zelaide reading or typing anything. But that didn’t mean he was uneducated. She remembered him mentioning that he had overhauled his home security system. Not to mention he responded to her text messages without issue. He was clearly capable of using technology and reading, so did he just decide not to use it unless he deemed it necessary?

“They generally don’t show interest in things unnecessary for survival. They are only attached to life...and their mates.”

“Mauri,” Arelia purred the pet name she gave her husband, grabbed him by the chin, and passionately kissed him on the lips in

front of Euphemia. Ronaldo, the man who prided himself on being a flirt, was completely upstaged by her.

Wow...

"Mngh...Arelia! I'm talking. Didn't you bring us tea? Would you mind pouring us some?"

"Okay..." Arelia listened to her husband's request and poured tea into each of the cups on the tray, spilling a little over the edges in the process. Then she reluctantly left the room per the look she received from Maurice.

"I can't apologize enough. Arelia is a great woman, she just doesn't know how to communicate with others. It doesn't bother me in the slightest, but it seems to be a common trait in Beast Bloods."

"I see..."

"By the way, how old do you think Arelia is?"

"Hm...somewhere around twenty-five or twenty-six?" Euphemia guessed.

"How about you?" Maurice asked Ronaldo.

"I'd guess around the same age."

"In her mid-twenties, huh? She certainly looks around that age. But she is actually older than forty. She's just a little older than me."

"She is?!"

"No way!"

Euphemia thought back on the gorgeous woman who had just stalked out of the room. Her smooth, unwrinkled skin and taut body could have only belonged to a young woman. But Palmina had mentioned before that it was believed that Beast Bloods developed much slower than humans.

She was telling the truth?

"Ever since I met Arelia and became her mate, I've extended my research to include Beast Bloods. Are you curious about my findings?" Maurice asked.

"Absolutely! I would love to hear what you have learned." Euphemia leaned forward in her chair.

"All right... Is your Beast Blood friend a man?"

"Yes."

"Are you mates?" Maurice questioned.

"What? Mia, is that true—"

"No! Don't jump to conclusions, Ronaldo," Euphemia said over him. "...I really...don't think we are. A part of me wishes it was

true, but I am just someone he was hired to protect...that's all I am to him—a contract. I don't think he dislikes me though..." Her voice grew quieter the more she spoke.

"...I see. You have to understand that Beast Bloods are a pure species. I'm sure you have already read through all the available information on them in the databank, so I won't repeat what you already know. What I have learned is that there are several curious traits about them beyond their unique physical characteristics. First, they age slowly once they reach adulthood. I assume this coincides with their longer lifespans, but the more curious aspect is that their minds develop even slower than their bodies."

"I knew it!" Euphemia exclaimed.

"You noticed it too? There have been times when I am speaking with Arelia where I have wondered if her mind is still that of a teenager. I used to wonder if they were a little slower to develop intellectually, but as I have interacted with Beast Bloods trying to consciously be aware of that, my theory has turned to conviction that their minds develop slower than their bodies."

Palmina's theory had been on the mark. She guessed it right.

"Seventy years is the average lifespan for humans living on this planet. Arelia is nearing middle-age in human years, her physical body is that of a young adult woman, and she has lived most of those years with the brain of a teenage girl. Of course this is if we apply human years and development to a Beast Blood."

"...Amazing..." Euphemia and Ronaldo said at the same time.

"Isn't it? It's no wonder they have a hard time getting by in human society when their looks and mentality don't add up by our standards. It makes sense why there were so many crimes involving Beast Bloods in the past. After being persecuted, they gave up living alongside humans and had no choice but to live alone as 'individuals.' It's ironic how that only further fueled mankind's inability to understand them."

"Good point." Euphemia wished she had an IHT to take down notes.

"Beast Bloods ravenously cling to life. They constantly sharpen various senses in order to survive. Their amygdala, the part of the brain that reads and processes emotions and facial expressions, is especially well-developed." Maurice tapped his finger against the side of his head. "Preliminary research shows that it might be more advanced than in the human brain."

The amygdala is one of two almond-shaped clusters of nuclei located deep and medially within the temporal lobes of the brain. It has been shown to perform a primary role in the processing of memory, decision-making, and emotional responses. It reacts especially to negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, sadness, and aggression. This is why it is also called the brain's fear center.

Euphemia and Ronaldo listened attentively to Maurice's research findings.

"They unconsciously exclude humans who are hostile toward them from their life."

Euphemia said nothing because she didn't want to interrupt Maurice.

"Do you know about Infernum?" he asked.

"Yes. They view Beast Bloods as a scourge on society and are willing to commit any crime to hunt them down," Euphemia answered.

"That's correct. The scar on Arelia's face was caused by their Huntsmen. Many more scars mar the rest of her body. I saved her when I found her collapsed and on the verge of death from a fatal wound."

"I'm so sorry to hear that..."

"We haven't been able to let down our guard even after we started living together. I retired from the academic world partially to protect Arelia. Though she's the stronger one," Maurice admitted with a sad smile. "I was once assaulted myself. I only survived because she came to my rescue."

"You were assaulted, Dr. DeLay?" Euphemia asked, covering her mouth with her hand. "Why...?"

"I suppose there are some people who are not happy with my research into seedless Night Blooms and its practical application in the wider world. I thought I was a goner when some thugs from Vermis surrounded me. Arelia appeared just in the nick of time. She knocked four large, armed men flat on their backs in the blink of an eye... She might have killed them then and there if I hadn't stopped her. Beast Bloods cling to life, but they are even more fixated on their mate's survival, that sometimes I wonder if that fixation borders on obsession," Maurice expounded, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"That is why I retired from the research institute," he finished. "So that I could protect both my wife and myself... Well, plainly

put, I ran away from it. I'm a coward, don't you think?"

"No...you aren't. Protecting your wellbeing comes first and foremost. But...it's different for Beast Bloods, isn't it? Their mate's wellbeing matters more than their own," Euphemia said. Zelaide had said something similar before. "I would like to think that humans are the same way, but actually acting on that is harder than just thinking it."

"How does your friend interact with you?" Maurice asked, his voice quiet.

"...How?" Euphemia thought about her interactions with Zelaide. "I don't think he hates me at least. But he is always drawing a line between us because he's a Beast Blood. It almost seems like he's afraid to cross that line..."

"I know this is an impolite question, but...has he touched you? Ah, please don't feel pressured to answer if you don't want to," Maurice faltered, his eyes shifting to Ronaldo.

"I'm going to go check out the backyard," Ronaldo said, rising from the chair.

Euphemia blushed when she realized the intent behind the question, but she sent a grateful look to Ronaldo and his rare show of consideration. Once he left the room, she faced Maurice again. Maurice silently watched her. She could tell he wasn't asking out of curiosity, so she decided to answer him with honesty.

"You mean that sexually, correct? Then just once."

"I see... I apologize for asking such an improper question of you."

"It's okay... He is very kind... But it seems like he is extremely concerned about having done that with me. He has been avoiding me ever since. He does dangerous work too."

"...He greatly cares for you," Maurice concluded.

"Really? What makes you think that?"

"Remember when I said the only thing Beast Bloods are more attached to than life is their mates? They don't care for much else or even pay it the time of day. I can't say if you are his mate or not, but he must view you as someone incredibly dear and irreplaceable. My years of research tell me that is a sure fact," Maurice declared resolutely.

†Chapter 7: Snare†

EUPHEMIA became engrossed in conversation with Maurice and didn't leave his house until the promised dinner date with Haydn.

"I'm terribly sorry for being late. I borrowed a room downstairs to change before dinner."

Thinking it was inappropriate to wear a work suit to a luxury restaurant, Euphemia changed into an elegant dress, put on casual jewelry, and fixed her hair and makeup. She practically ran up to the restaurant on the top floor with Ronaldo, but still arrived slightly past seven. She was on pins and needles worrying she'd offended Haydn, but he welcomed them with a generous wave of his hand.

They were shown into a private room with a stunning view of the nighttime scenery.

"Oh, that's perfectly all right. It's natural for women to take time to prepare themselves. You look lovely in that dress."

"Thank you very much. It was a gift from my sister," Euphemia responded amiably to his obvious flattery. "I didn't know there was a TV station in this building. It's no wonder I saw so many people coming in and out on my way up."

"Yes. There seems to have been a special event held today."

"I saw a lot of big rigs in the parking garage. Wonder if they were for the event," Ronaldo added.

"There certainly were a lot," Haydn responded, waiting for a break in their small talk to call over the waiter.

The waiter waiting at the back of the room respectfully handed them the menus and explained the specials. They were being waited on hand and foot, as expected of VIP treatment in a private room.

Aperitifs were served before the first course.

"This is wonderful wine. I've never tasted anything like it before," Euphemia said, holding the beautiful red liquor under the chandelier lights. The wine she tasted for the first time perfectly fit her palate. In the back of her mind she stressed that she mustn't drink too much.

"This is a wine made from grapes harvested from grapevines grown in fields artificially altered to reproduce the exact taste of grapes from the old world," Haydn explained, swirling the wine in his glass.

"Then you used seeds from stasis?" Euphemia asked. Botany was her primary research field.

"Yes, I was able to obtain them after extensive searching. Things left behind by the old world bring us immeasurable benefits to this day. Wine is but one of many gifts they imparted," Haydn said, spellbound by the ruby-red alcohol he held up to the light.

"...I wonder what happened to that world. There was a whole civilization there, the things that they made, and the things that they lived alongside. How could we just lose a planet and its people?" Euphemia asked. That question had plagued her for a long time.

"Many say that our homeworld and its people shared their fate with the dying sun. We are the ones they sent out into the galaxy. The old worlders picked our ancestors just before the world's demise and entrusted the future to them. We must not forget that we are the descendants of the chosen ones," Haydn articulated with confidence.

"But why isn't there any record of it or what came after? Was there a reason they chose not to write down their history?" Ronaldo asked, unusually serious.

"Maybe there was some conflict they didn't want later generations to know of?"

"Perhaps there are some things we are better off not knowing, and yet I find the old saying 'those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it' is also valid. If we don't know why they left, how can we make sure the same fate doesn't happen to the colonies?"

"...You say some thought-provoking things, Euphemia."

Dinner proceeded surprisingly well over the chosen conversation topic.

Every dish was superb and the setting left nothing wanting. Even Haydn, who normally seemed to dislike interacting with others, perfectly entertained his two young dinner guests. He teased Ronaldo and complimented Euphemia at all the right times.

Compared to Gothic City, where the buildings towered over the land and pierced the sky like spears, Romanesque City had an idyllic atmosphere, and the night view from the top floor of the

tallest building in the city was breathtaking in its own way.

“Do you own this entire building?” Euphemia asked Haydn.

“It belongs to my company rather than me personally. The same applies to all the surrounding buildings.”

“Holy Muta. You have more money than I could even imagine,” Ronaldo joked.

“Only having money is boring. I’m an old single man after all. Money only has meaning if you have something worth spending it on,” Haydn answered Ronaldo with a composed smile.

“What? You aren’t married, Mister Haydn?” Euphemia asked.

“Never got married. Don’t have any living family members either. Hahaha, I’m a lonely old man. All I have going for me are my hobbies.”

“Your hobbies? Please don’t tell me your hobby is working?”

“Good one,” Haydn laughed. “I certainly enjoy my work, but I wouldn’t call it a hobby... I’m not that miserable of a man, I hope.”

“Mister Haydn...”

“Would you please stop with the formalities? My friends call me Zig. My first name is Ziggurat.”

As far as formalities were concerned, Haydn was being far too formal with them when they were much younger than him, but being polite seemed to be his default mode. Euphemia, however, was more surprised that Haydn had friends who were close enough to call him by a nickname.

“Ziggurat? That’s an unusual name.”

“Isn’t it? It’s a word taken from the old world. Apparently it refers to a holy pyramid temple that connected heaven and earth.”

He skillfully hid it from his face, but Haydn pronounced that word with the utmost care. He took great pride in his name.

“A holy temple that connects heaven and earth?”

“Yes.” Haydn stared at Euphemia.

“What a wonderful name... May I ask what your hobbies are?” she asked to escape his sticky gaze.

“Well...to sum it up in one easy word: *movies*... Or perhaps *filming* fits better?”

“Movies! That’s a great hobby!” Ronaldo exclaimed. “I love movies too.”

“I enjoy watching videos... I fancy old world video data in particular. Not a lot of it is well-known today, but there are some excellent pieces,” Haydn said, more animated than usual.

“Oh...I’ve caught the occasional special feature on IHT TV. I believe the works of the past were a lot more imaginative than those today,” Euphemia said, taking another sip of wine.

“I agree. What I enjoy the most are documentaries that show reality. The true, raw filming data without any special effects or post-editing. The nitty-gritty type. Love it so much I ended up becoming a TV station owner.”

“Wow! That’s what makes you so different from the rest of us. You act on your interests,” Ronaldo said, sincerely impressed.

“I can dispatch my film crew to different locations and have them film various types of unedited content. Makes my hobby easier than gathering film data alone.”

“Have you gathered a lot of films up until now?” Euphemia asked.

“Oh yes, I certainly have. Everything from the beautiful to the shocking... I ended up with such a wide collection I have started to narrow down the genres I’m looking for now. How would you like to see my film archives someday, Euphemia? I would love to show you,” Haydn said with a smile. “Oh, would you like some more?” He gestured to her half-empty wineglass. The waiter came over and filled it to the brim.

“Are you sure you want to show me? My older sister is Mayor Saionji.”

“That doesn’t matter. Your sister is certainly my rival, but you aren’t. She’s an understanding person. I’m certain she will allow it. There is a film I am dying to show you.”

“I look forward to seeing this wonderful film of yours then,” Euphemia said with an open-mind and a placid smile as the excellent wine made her feel like she was on cloud nine.

†††

THE air feels sticky.

There was no sound, but Euphemia could feel the humidity on her skin—it was raining. Rain trapped moisture in the earth and people in their homes.

“.....”

Euphemia cracked open her crusty eyes. Something unfamiliar encapsulated her stiff body. An expensive silk blanket rubbed

against her skin as she stirred. She didn't remember owning any silks. Then again, her mind was foggy.

Her senses slowly started to return through the haze.

What in the Wilds happened to me?

She reached out and patted down her body. Relief washed over her when she felt her clothes were on. The room was dark, but not submerged in pure darkness. She turned her neck and looked down at a narrow beam of light on the floor just beyond her feet. The door to another room appeared to be cracked open. Light leaked in from that slight opening. A cold, blue light.

What is that?

She was struck by an intense wave of dizziness when she tried to get up. Nauseous, she sank back into the blanket. Soft warmth enveloped her chilled and sweaty body. She was lying on what should have been a very comfortable king-sized bed covered in exquisite blankets and fluffy down pillows. One she was unfamiliar with.

"What?"

Where am I? What is this place? Why am I here?

Panic slowly sunk in. Euphemia's stomach churned and bile rose up the back of her throat.

Calm down. Panicking won't get you anywhere. What do you remember last? I was having dinner with Ronaldo and Mister Haydn... and then...

She remembered dinner reaching the main course. They were in the middle of an enthusiastic conversation about movies when her wineglass was topped off.

The wine?!

"I see you've come to."

Someone had come to stand beside Euphemia while she had her eyes squeezed shut to stop from throwing up.

"...What?" She opened her eyes. Haydn was standing beside the bed. "U-Um, why am I...?"

"Oh, it's all right. You just had a little too much to drink and fell asleep. I carried you to my suite on the floor below the restaurant. You can rest easy."

I can't rest easy! How could I have humiliated myself in front of Erica's rival like this?! Euphemia panicked.

"I-I'm sorry...for the trouble! I will head right home," she said in a flurry.

“How will you do that?” Haydn asked, his voice flat.

“By helicopter... What time is it? We planned on leaving at ten, right? But is it just me or does it seem like it’s raining?”

If it’s raining, then it’s well past midnight?

“It is... It’s just past four in the morning. I made the decision that it was best for you to go home tomorrow since you were sound asleep. There aren’t any helicopters that will fly in this downpour,” Haydn said, crushing any hope that she could leave now.

No wonder why it felt sticky. It’s always like that at this hour. Just how drunk did I get to lose consciousness? I was being so careful not to have more than a glassful.

Euphemia cringed and felt miserable for having screwed up royally once again.

But I didn’t even drink a whole glass... The waiter came over and refilled it once I reached the halfway mark... I don’t remember finishing that glass.

“I-I’m sorry, but I need to contact my sister...”

“Don’t you worry about that. I will handle matters with Mayor Saionji,” Haydn said.

“You are going to contact her? By the way, what happened to Ronaldo?”

“Oh, him. He is resting in another room. He fell asleep like you.”

No way. Ronaldo drank himself unconscious too?

Ronaldo could hold his liquor better than most. Euphemia was starting to sense that something troubling was afoot. But she felt so dizzy and sick to her stomach that she struggled to think straight.

“I-I see. I’m sorry we both inconvenienced you so... I promise to make it up to you a-at a later time... E-Excuse me, but where might my purse be?” she asked, her tongue dry and causing her to stutter.

“Your purse? It’s in this room over here.” Haydn’s voice lacked any tone.

“Oh, thank you. I wanted to send a message to a friend on my IHT...”

I’ll let Zelaide know what happened. He might come get me first thing. And I’ll take the chance to secretly send a message to Erica, just in case...

Euphemia barely managed to slide out of bed and stand. Bile threatened to come up her throat, her head spun like a top, and her

legs wobbled. But she had to push through.

Concentrating on putting one unstable foot in front of the other, she staggered into the adjoining room.

This room was also spacious, and although it was dark without the lights on, there was one big light source illuminating the space.

A huge monitor faced the door and a bunch of smaller ones lined the walls around her.

What played there was—

“See this? It’s a Bijour. Ain’t it cute?”

Headlights illuminated the dark Wilds and the backs of two men. They had their hands on a woman.

“H-How...did you get one of these?!”

“This area here seems soft... Plus, it’s in view of the camera.”

“N-No... Stop it... Stop it!”

The woman’s face crumpled with fear on the screen.

“Don’t screw with me!”

The video stopped playing and the room darkened without the flickering lights.

The last image from froze on the monitors, illuminating Euphemia in its blue glow as she stood there in shock.

“...Wasn’t it a splendid film? This is what I have been dying to show you,” a velvety voice whispered next to her ear.



Euphemia was speechless.

“But there isn’t anything worth watching after that. I always stop it there. After all, the rest of the footage is ruined by that loathsome Beast Blood. I really ought to properly edit it soon...”

“...Mister Haydn?” Euphemia squeezed out from her parched throat, her voice trembling.

“It’s Zig. Please call me that, Euphemia... Your name is beautiful as well...”

“What in the colonies is this...?”

“You can’t tell? It’s video footage of you from that time... Let me rewind it for you.” Haydn pressed the replay button. All the monitors in the room began playing again.

“...These unintelligent buffoons obscure the view, but don’t you think your terrified face is a pure work of unadulterated art? Not to mention...this expression here!” Haydn paused the video.

He stopped on the image of Euphemia pinned under the men, her shirt ripped open. It was the moment Euphemia, driven to despair, resolutely raised her free hand to slit her own throat.

“Aahh...it doesn’t get better than this...” Haydn cooed.

The video began to play in slow motion. Haydn intently watched the largest monitor, his euphoric expression lit up by the blue backlight.

“You were prepared to die here, right? Your eyes in this instant were...breathtaking. I have watched it hundreds of times and it still gives me chills... Say, Euphemia?” Haydn stepped closer. “I want to see this face again. In person. I have prepared the perfect stage for you. Sleep for now. I will have taken you somewhere even better by the time you awake...”

†††

“**URRGHH...!**” Euphemia threw up bitter gastric juices.

How many times have I thrown up now?

The polished washbasin in the beautiful marble bathroom was stained and dirtied with vomit. Automatic sensors responded with a stream of water that washed the vomit down the drain in a swirl.

“Nggh...haaah...”

Her stomach painfully contracted even though she shouldn’t have anything left to throw up. Sweat beaded her face. Several

droplets trickled down her chin onto the cold floor. She couldn't stop gasping for air. Nor could she bring herself to look in the mirror. She was keenly aware of the man filming her from behind. She'd rather die than let him capture the look on her face right now.

From what Euphemia could tell, about one whole day had elapsed since she was abducted. She couldn't be sure because there weren't any clocks in this room and all the windows were shuttered.

Haydn said it was around four in the morning when she first woke up in his suite.

Clearly he had transported her somewhere after she fell asleep and she had no idea where she was now. At the very least, she could guess it wasn't in the same building as his TV station where he had treated her to dinner. It was too loud there for the sheer lack of noise now. But without looking outside, she didn't know whether this was somewhere within Romanesque City or not.

Almost half a day has gone by since I woke up. So it has to be around evening time, Euphemia deduced.

Ever since she woke up she had been forced to watch Haydn's cherished collection of videos in this creepy room. Each video captured horrifying atrocities such as people being pushed into a cage full of starving Bijours or women being raped by several men at once. This was the collection Haydn so desperately wanted her to view. His *hobby*.

Haydn grabbed her by the back of the head and forced her to watch his sick videos. She wasn't allowed to close her eyes or look away. Whenever she tried to, he whispered in her ear, "Don't you care what will happen to Ronaldo?" He threatened to give him the same fate as the young men fed to Muta in his precious videos.

The only thing he allowed her to do was run to the bathroom and throw up once it became too much. Haydn ecstatically filmed her throwing up with his camcorder. That was the only moment she had away from the monitors.

"Are you finished?" he asked in that coaxing, velvety voice of his.

Every time she heard it, Euphemia had the urge to throw up. She glared over her shoulder at the man filming her as she clung to the washbasin.

"Ooh...excellent. Your gemlike eyes moistening with anguish and hate is exquisite. Seeing you bite your lips until they bleed..."

gives me chills and a thrill I just can't find anywhere else. Come on out. I have much more to show you."

Haydn looked down at Euphemia, who glared hatefully up at him, and smiled like a good-natured old man might. He gave her trembling back a gentle push, hurrying her back into the luxurious viewing room to show her the next video. The room remained dark with only the square light coming from the TVs to illuminate it.

Haydn guided her down into a plush, leather easy chair.

"How...how could you do something so cruel?" Euphemia hissed while he filled a cup with high-grade liquor within reach of her.

"Hm? I haven't done a single thing. These are merely films I have collected. I wasn't involved in their making. This is simply my private collection to enjoy during my personal time."

"Liar! You made those people do these horrible things to others! Some of the people being run over by trucks and torn to shreds by Muta were screaming your name!" Euphemia shouted despite her burning throat.

"What they scream has nothing to do with me. Look...a young boy is the star of this one. He has such long and pretty limbs. Aren't you hot with anticipation wondering what will happen to him?"

"...Stop it...just stop it! I've had enough. I'm going to lose my mind if I see anymore!" Euphemia covered her ears and shoved her face between her legs.

Haydn yanked her back into a viewing position by the hair.

"That's a lofty opinion coming from the filthy woman who gave her body over to that Beast Blood mongrel," Haydn spat before his attention went back to the screens. "Oh, look, look. The boy is about to be violated by that big man. Can you tell that the boy is a young Beast Blood? See, his eyes are glowing."

The camera zoomed in on the boy's wide, terrified eyes. Faint light radiated from his irises. He looked around seven or eight in human years. Brutish men surrounded him. Beast Bloods possessed physical prowess leaps beyond humans, but he was still just a small child. He stood no chance against several adult men.

The boy screamed something at the screen. But there was no sound. Around half of the videos Haydn forced her to watch were soundless. This sociopath said he liked to enjoy their terrified expressions without it being contaminated by sound. True enough, their muted fear burned into the mind.

“We captured this youngling while he was roaming the Sea of Trees. He was used to create several titillating videos,” Haydn said without an ounce of guilt.

Euphemia was frightened by his casual use of the past tense. She didn’t want to think of what his fate was in the end.

“You’re sick. I don’t want to watch anymore of this crap with you...” Euphemia hissed between gritted teeth. She wrenched her body away, not caring that he had a fistful of her hair clenched in his hand. For a small man, Haydn had a strong grip.

“Hahaha... You will become docile soon enough... And once you do, I will produce and direct the best film for you to star in. Aahh, how I look forward to it,” Haydn said, tossing Euphemia onto the floor when she bit his hand.

Euphemia braced herself as she hit the ground and glared up at him. From the floor she saw Haydn’s black pants growing taut in the crotch area. He was being turned on. The cruel fate of the victims in his videos aroused the sick bastard. However, oddly enough, he didn’t once touch Euphemia in a sexual manner or even suggest it.

“What are you staring at?” Haydn followed her gaze to his nether region. “Oh, I see. Are you getting aroused as well and want me to embrace you now?”

Euphemia averted her gaze from his sickeningly stick smile.

“Unfortunately for you, I don’t possess the vulgar hobby of rubbing bodies with women,” he continued with a chuckle. “Thrusting a piece of my body into another is nothing but repugnant. Women can’t satiate me. But I suppose...if you become the splendid heroine from my marvelous script and show me that expression that has captivated me so...I might finally be satisfied.”

“...What?”

“You tried to take your own life before you could be raped by those punks in the pitch-dark Wilds. Your eyes in that very moment had overcome fear and reached utopia. I’ve never seen such heavenly emerald... Ahh, it’s so thrilling...! Ahhn!”

Haydn suddenly threw his head back, leaned into the chair, and convulsed. At first Euphemia thought he had a stroke, but that wasn’t it. A wet stain slowly seeped through the nether region of his suit.

“Aaaah! Just reimagining it does this to me... After watching it so many times, it has practically become a piece of me.”

Euphemia's gut churned. She bent over to throw up again, but nothing came out.

"I actually wanted to get my hands on you sooner, Euphemia."

"Then you're the one sent those Vermi—"

"No. That was an honest coincidence."

That was the day Euphemia had become so enthralled by the Night Blooms, she drove down the freeway in the dead of night. The same day she met her strong and beautiful Beast Blood.

"Those Vermi planned to feed a young woman to the Bijour, but you becoming their target was a miracle."

This man calls that night a miracle?

It wasn't the Vermi who planned to attack a young woman, but this man who ordered them to do it. Euphemia just so happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. But, to her, meeting Zelaide really was miraculous.

Tears stung the back of her eyes as she thought back on the day he saved her. *Am I a horrible, unscrupulous woman for being even slightly grateful to this man for making that encounter possible?* She bit the inside of her cheek.

"And then...that foul Beast Blood had to ruin it..." Haydn grimaced as if he knew what Euphemia was thinking. His brows snapped together with irritation, erasing his prior euphoria. "Filthy beast... You already allowed yourself to be defiled by that dirty animal... No way you haven't after how hard you tried to entice him in the breeding room..."

Haydn looked with disgust upon Euphemia on the floor.

"W-Was it you? You learned about Zelaide and me and used his sperm to..."

Was he the coward who cruelly murdered Manuela and framed Zelaide for it?

"No. Shank's the one who did that," Haydn answered with amusement.

Euphemia had no idea what was so amusing.

"Who's Shank?"

That was the name confessed by the man Zelaide strung up the night he saved her.

"Shank is..."

"My other name."

The large door suddenly opened. A slender man stood in the doorway.

“Good grief. You finally made it. You are always such a handful.” Haydn shrugged and shook his head.

Euphemia couldn’t make out the newcomer’s face because it was bright behind him. But his silhouette and tempered voice belonged to someone she knew well.

“Y-You... You’re...” Euphemia strained her eyes as she clamored to her feet.

Impossible. It can’t be. This can’t be happening.

“Why...?”

I don’t believe it. I don’t believe it. I can’t...

The shadowed figure sighed.

“...I warned you so many times... You wouldn’t be here if you had listened. I’m sorry, but you will have to play your role until the end now, Euphemia Ashencourt.”

Her voice was heavy with despair as she gasped out, “Director Burhardt...”

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THINKING was never Zelaide’s strong suit. Once he started concentrating on his thoughts, he was forced to face his inner self like looking into a mirror. He felt cut off from the outside world whenever he faced the beast within.

That was why he was always on the move. Unnecessary thoughts didn’t haunt him when he was moving his body. Anxiety and distress were always waiting just around the corner to crush him the moment he stood still. The past and future were not to be thought about. Only the present mattered.

Too many things had felt oddly out of place as of late. While each was insignificant on its own, the number of oddities continued to multiply at a dizzying rate, growing into one grand annoyance. He wouldn’t be able to move on unless he put the trivial puzzle pieces together and saw the bigger picture behind it.

Zelaide’s instincts set off alarm bells within him. Blaming his inability to think on his lack of education was a sorry excuse. He was capable of thinking, he just didn’t like to. Now was the time to put his brain to work and grab hold of the clues before they became missing puzzle pieces.

Which clues mattered most?

The man named Shank that the young Inferni blurted out definitely mattered. This plain-looking man was supposedly in a boxlike, empty room, and wore specs with a different thickness and color on one side.

Who was this shadowy figure who appeared and disappeared behind the scenes of conflict?

And then there was someone at Biotech who knew in advance that Euphemia was going to invite him into the breeding lab that night. Murakami was currently looking into who it might be, but it was unquestionably someone Euphemia knew well. But she had gone to great lengths to keep their little rendezvous a secret. She said she turned the cameras around and cut the sound before asking Zelaide to join her in the lab.

The spy knew Zelaide and Euphemia were together and left them be. And then they watched what happened from another room. Otherwise, the emergency alarm wouldn't have sounded with such impeccable timing. There obviously wasn't a malfunction. The spy set it off to stop them from making love.

Enemies abounded inside Biotech, City Hall, and Gothic City. But where was Shank?

Wei and Murakami were narrowing down the suspects based on various data such as the history of who accessed that room. They would investigate using human means and abiding by human laws. But Zelaide's weapon was neither the law nor the strength of belonging to an organization such as Biotech or the police force. Raw instinct was all he had going for him.

The sleeper agent was someone inside Biotech who had close and personal knowledge about Zelaide and Euphemia. Since they were targeting Zelaide, they had to be a member of Infernum or one of the syndicates behind it. There were plenty of staff members at Biotech who were friends with Euphemia but didn't know about Zelaide.

The only people he had contact with were Sonia, Ronaldo, a couple of her immediate coworkers, and her bosses Burhardt and Murakami. The rest were just nameless faces that might have seen him when he came to pick her up. Who should he suspect in this situation? How should he narrow it down?

But each person I met was oddly fixated on me in different ways.

Zelaide thought back on the few occasions he interacted with them. Sonia threw herself on him out of sexual attraction, Ronaldo

had a bone to pick with him over his interest in Euphemia, and Burhardt was interested in him from a scientific perspective.

Come to think of it, there was somethin' off 'bout him.

The strangeness his instincts called attention to needled at him. Zelaide closed his eyes and concentrated on digging up the fading insignificant impression he had.

"You're like one of the males of a sexually dimorphic species that develop ostentatious looks for the sole purpose of attracting females."

The man had said that to Zelaide when he saw him during the dinner with Euphemia's coworkers.

What he said wasn't important; Zelaide was used to being held in contempt. Many humans openly disparaged Beast Bloods despite their fear. Or perhaps because of it. And, as a Beast Blood, Zelaide was closely attuned to their emotions. Even the haughtiest of clients exuded instinctual fear toward the Beast Blood they spoke down on. Men were especially fearful. They unknowingly discern what is stronger than them and are frightened by it.

But that man wasn't scared of me. He even seemed to be intentionally provoking me. And thinking back, he said some strange things too...

Zelaide drew on his memory of their uncomfortable conversation.

"You are aware it will increase the number of hours you have to spend at work, yes? Will you be okay after that incident?"

"I don't mind! You have my sincerest gratitude for your concern."

Then Zelaide's thoughts turned to something Euphemia told him recently.

"Director Burhardt is rumored as the most likely next president. He's been so kind to a new researcher like me and has been extra considerate ever since I was first attacked by Vermi. Meanwhile President Murakami didn't even say a word to me."

She was referring to the attack that started it all. The incident when Vermi thugs nearly killed her in the Wilds. That was the night Zelaide and Euphemia met.

During their meal together, Zelaide disregarded the comment as Burhardt simply being worried about her, but on closer inspection, that incident was kept a highly confidential secret. Then again, he might have been informed since he was Euphemia's direct superior.

This is just my instincts talking.

Zelaide reached out and grabbed an IHT. One with direct access to Erica. It was currently one in the afternoon, not the typical time he contacted the mayor. But the IHT only rang once before the other side picked up.

“Zelaide?” Erica’s voice was harder than usual.

“...Do you have a minute, Mayor?”

“Yes. I was just about to contact you myself.”

“What happened?!”

The tone of her voice told him the situation was dire. Nervous sweat coated his hands. He was ready to fly into action.

“...Please don’t jump the gun. I have no solid proof something has gone wrong yet. Please remain calm, Zelaide,” Erica requested, trying her best to keep her own voice level. “I have unfortunately kept some information from you. It’s not something we should discuss over the IHT. Do you remember the door you used to come to City Hall last time? There is a small member’s only bar located in the basement of the building right beside it. Can you come right away? I will tell you there.”

Zelaide bolted from the room without answering.

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CITY Hall’s symbolic spire came into view as Zelaide turned off Circle Line. He parked his car in the alleyway and found the building Erica mentioned. There was no sign outside the building, but the bar was located below. He slipped inside the inconspicuous door. Several customers were seated inside the long and narrow lounge.

A staff member immediately showed him to a small private room in the back. The door opened within seconds of his arrival. Erica stood on the opposite side. Unexpectedly, she was all alone despite the late hour. There was no mistaking it was her despite the uncharacteristic clothing style and dark specs she wore. She was breathing heavily.

“You alone?” Zelaide asked, surprised Erica came all this way alone. That was not something the ruler of a powerful city with a population of five million did.

“It’s not as bad as you think. I’m sure you noticed the guards stationed outside. All of the staff and customers inside are

Guardians as well. But time is against us. Tell me what you contacted me for... What happened? Does it have to do with Euphemia? Or something else?" Erica asked several questions in a row before removing her jacket.

"There's somethin' that's been bothering me to the point I had to ask. It has to do with the time Euphemia was first attacked by Vermi. Who else knows about it aside from us?" Zelaide asked.

"Murakami. I told him," Erica answered without hesitation. None of the bar staff entered the room. There wasn't even a glass of water placed on the table before them.

"...No one else should know. Not even Mrs. Mayo, the housekeeper I hired to keep an eye on Euphemia, was informed. Also, while the police know about the Vermi murder case, I did not tell them that Euphemia was attacked. My personal circumstances required me not to make Mia's incident public. So the only people who know about it aside from you and Mia are me and Murakami. And Murakami is my most trusted confidant."

"He's a strange man, but...seems trustworthy," Zelaide conceded.

"He is my right-hand man," Erica stated with confidence.

"I see... If you say so, then it must be true. But that man knew."

"What man?"

"Yumi's direct boss. That Burhardt guy..."

"Burhardt? All right. I will let Murakami know."

Erica was convinced without hearing his reasoning. She pulled out her IHT and quickly typed up a short message. Zelaide had never seen letters like the ones she used. It was a curious writing style that made use of a combination of different characters and symbols. A reply came within seconds. Erica lifted her gaze from the screen.

"Your hunch was correct, Zelaide. Murakami narrowed down the suspect to two people and was tracking their movement. But I just received word that he was finally able to parse data located deep within Burhardt's personal IHT concerning Chude incubation."

"The Chude!"

That was the name of that short, serpentine Muta. The very Muta that had wiggled its way into his house through a small opening in the window. Discovering information on how to remove one of those rare Muta from incubation on Burhardt's IHT could

mean only one thing.

He's the culprit who released that snake into my house! Zelaide realized that his gut feeling was right again.

"It seems Murakami has suspected him for a while and monitored his activity. He hacked into his personal IHT, copied all the data off, and began analyzing it. It took him a long time to crack the code, but we now have solid proof. Burhardt is Biotech's traitor. Murakami said he's already on his way to Burhardt's residence with a guard unit. Perhaps he has already captured him."

Sweat beaded Erica's brow. She didn't realize Burhardt was the traitor until now either.

"Your turn to talk," Zelaide prodded. "Where is Yumi—Euphemia?"

"...She went to Romanesque City to conduct an experiment with her gerbils. A certain person suggested it and I allowed it. It's true that I wanted to let her move her research to the next stage so she could come one step closer to realizing her dream of eradicating Nightz, but...the real reason I allowed it was to lure the enemy into making a move on her. Mia knows nothing—nngh!" Erica gagged while she spoke. In that moment, she was certain the man sitting across from her was going to kill her with his bare hands.

Murderous intent exuded from the Beast Blood.

"I am sincerely sorry about keeping this quiet after asking you to protect her. But, while I cannot fill you in on the details, the state of this city has worsened greater than I imagined. The threat sent to us this afternoon hinted at a terrorist attack involving a large number of citizens. The enemy is about to enact their final plan. But this is the same enemy who has tried on multiple occasions to make contact with Euphemia. I decided to use that against them by sending her out into the open. We are facing a powerful political figure. I was positive they wouldn't risk their standing in front of spectators to get to her. They know that I sent bodyguards to watch over her," Erica rattled on, almost in defense of her actions.

"Where is Yumi?" asked a graveled voice through clenched teeth.

"I last heard from her just before seven. She went to see another researcher after her experiment was a success. After that, I received a short message from her IHT saying that she was going to delay her return until tomorrow morning. The original plan was for her to take the eight o'clock flight and arrive here within the hour. I

haven't heard anything from her since. All the guards I sent with her have gone silent."

Romanesque City was about four hours from Gothic City by helicopter.

"I can only assume that someone sent that message on her IHT in order to buy time. I already sent a backup unit to Romanesque City. They will take action soon... I must apologize to you for breaching our contract," Erica said weakly.

"...I doubt they will kill her," she continued. "They will likely use her as a bargaining chip to make insane demands of me. They want to force me into a situation where my ability to look out for my own family and, by extension, this city, will be called into question. All in order to drag me out of my position as mayor."

Zelaide wasn't listening to her.

"...Who?" he growled. *Who's the ringleader?*

"Senator Ziggurat Haydn," Erica gave a perfunctory answer.

"...The guy who kept criticizin' me..."

"That's the one. He has had an unusual interest in Euphemia for a while now. He kept inviting her to his vacation home..."

It made sense why Euphemia's actions had been leaked to the other side if Haydn was behind it. He didn't have to risk exposure by planting a spy directly beside the cautious and shrewd mayor when he could freely walk the halls of City Hall. All he had to do was ask a leading question like "Oh, was that the mayor's sister I just saw...?" and staff would provide him as much information as he sought. It was such a natural and trivial occurrence that they didn't have to report it to Erica.

Every incident until now had been a part of his schemes.

"He has Yumi—"

"There hasn't been any report or witnesses that he does," Erica said quickly before Zelaide could jump to conclusions. "The emergency signal on the micro IHT I gave Ronaldo Garcia went off about an hour ago, but the weak signal died a minute later. I tracked the signal down to the tallest building in Romanesque City. It belongs to Haydn."

"Garcia?"

Zelaide remembered the young man who worked with Euphemia. He skillfully hid his fear as he joked around with Zelaide. That was a typical human male's attitude toward Beast Bloods. He was one of Erica's minions.

Ziggurat Haydn, the influential Gothic City senator and owner of the world's biggest conglomerate. And Kreutz Burhardt, Haydn's lackey and Euphemia's direct boss who worked behind the scenes to make all sorts of things go awry.

Those two men had been watching Zelaide and Euphemia from City Hall and the laboratory. They had shed their skin and were baring their poisonous fangs out in the open for the first time.

There was no time to waste.

Think. Think! What would I do if I was in their shoes?

They might not kill Euphemia. But that didn't matter anymore. They had stolen Zelaide's mate from him.

Zelaide's pupils thinned into needles. Visibility narrowed and his breathing came shallow and fast.

"I'll kill 'em."

The rumbling in the back of his throat made audible sound. Turning whiter than a sheet, Erica stared at him.

"I'll kill ya too if anything happens to her." Zelaide's voice came out harder than a gun barrel.

"That's right. I even put my one and only little sister's life on the line." The color may have left her skin, but Erica's voice didn't falter. "Haydn is Gothic City's media king, the CEO of one of this world's leading conglomerates, a senator, and a likely contender for the next mayor. He is also the one responsible for distributing Nightz throughout the world. His reach is beginning to extend to the other colonies even... I needed unshakable evidence to corner him... Preferably catching him in the middle of a crime red-handed. I only recently became convinced it was him. But I couldn't catch him no matter how I tried. He frequently visits Romanesque City, so I thought I might be able to uncover something there...which is why I sent Mia..."

"....."

Zelaide's angry gaze silently sliced into the mayor. She was probably also imagining all the horrible possibilities that awaited her sister. Murderous rage bubbled inside him. But he shouldn't direct that fury at Erica. His thoughts kept reminding his curling fists of that.

"You are infuriated...with me. But this was the only chance. I was informed that he was heading to Romanesque City for plausible business reasons. He must have approached Mia pretending their encounter was a coincidence. I also had eyes on Haydn, but I

suddenly stopped hearing from them all at once.”

Tension pervaded the cramped room.

Erica's IHT lit up as if to break through the intensity. It was a direct video message from Murakami. Erica tapped the back of her ear turning on the speaker implanted within and took the call. Shock instantly colored her dark eyes.

“Burhardt escaped! Murakami is seriously injured!” she cried.

“What?” Zelaide jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over in the process. Erica was still in the middle of her video call.

“...Yes... I understand. I will be right there.”

“What happened?!” he shouted, impatience coursing through him.

Erica sunk into the chair, broken. “...Murakami had the tides turned against him when he tried to launch a sneak attack on Burhardt. One of the Guardians with him was fatally wounded. Murakami also has severe injuries. Aahhh! I was naïve! Mia!” She covered her mouth and half-sobbed. It was the first time Erica cried.

“I'm going!” Zelaide bellowed. His teal eyes flashed silver.

“...Zelaide?”

“I'm gonna rescue her.”

Those were the words Erica would have given anything to hear. She lifted her face from her hands like a malfunctioning robot. Her hair was a mess, her cheeks drained of color.

“Zelaide...why do you go so far for her...?” she asked in a cracked voice.

“My contract isn't up yet. That's all,” the Beast Blood said, his face turned away from her.

“...All right. Zelaide Silvergray, I leave everything in your hands. Please protect Euphemia...my precious sister.”

“On it!”

Zelaide barreled into the dark city streets.

Yumi. Euphemia... Wilds take me! Let me get to her in time!

†††

A silver car sped down the night freeway like a bolt of lightning.

Only certain vehicles were granted permission to drive at this hour. Mostly tractor trailers loaded with large containers. The silver car darted into the darkness, slipping passed the trucks that moved

as slow as they were large.

Thick shadows hung over the Wilds. How many hours had his foot pressed down the accelerator since parting with Erica?

Anger and sorrow bore down on him.

I said I'd protect her...

A wide-scale search was conducted throughout Gothic City, but Kreutz Burhardt's whereabouts were as unknown as the deep forests of the Wilds. There wasn't a single clue to go off. Worst yet, his apartment was practically empty. No pictures, memos, clothes, tableware, or anything else that revealed someone lived there. It seemed suspicious that was even his residence. There was no proof of his identity, no evidence of his past, and no fingerprints or even a strand of hair left behind.

"Chwirk?" Topsy chirped from his perch in the back seat.

The tiny Muta swooped down when Zelaide hopped in his car and took advantage of his master's haste to fly inside the car with him.

"Tip! Don't fly! Stay seated!" Zelaide yelled.

The tiny winged Muta didn't understand his words, but stayed perched, almost as if he sensed his master's anger.

"The city! Yumi! Euphemia!" Zelaide shouted toward the mountains rising over the road ahead. The strong lights glaring below the mountains looked like a huge tomb. A large ring of light clung to the gently sloping hills.

Romanesque city.

Wait for me! I'll find you...even if it kills me!

Zelaide stepped on the accelerator until the pedal hit the floor.

†Chapter 8: Raid†

EARLY morning, just as first light began to cut through the dark after the rain, Zelaide's lengthy figure was reflected in a puddle of water. He was standing in an empty alley behind an abandoned building somewhere in Romanesque City. Four shadows suddenly emerged from the dark alleys weaving between the multistory buildings that seemed short compared to the rising skyscrapers of Gothic City.

Four Beast Bloods. Three men and one woman.

One man was large and burly like a bear, the second tall and skinny, and the third was a handsome redhead who looked younger than Zelaide. The woman was clad entirely in leather blacker than her long, raven hair. In the early morning when the sun hadn't risen yet, their eyes gleamed.



"Long time no see, Zelaide."

"I was hopin' it'd be longer."

"That's some attitude ya've got there."

"Were ya able to locate the enemy with the intel I gave, Vulcan?" Zelaide asked the bearlike man.

"Yeah," Vulcan Asymmetry responded, unaffected by his younger kin's lack of formality. Just like his last name suggested, his eyes were two different colors. Slits at the end of his eyebrows made them look like snake tongues. The man himself looked more like a giant red bull than a snake. He gestured with his chin to the woman in black crouched behind him. "Mizelle, share your intel."

Mizelle was unusually slender for a Beast Blood, and had a beautiful but narrow face.

"Only two helicopters arrived in this city today. One was quite large and landed on the rooftop of Speyer Building early in the morning," Mizelle explained in an emotionless voice. "We have confirmed a number of civilians were onboard that one. The other was a small two-seater. It flew north of the city before noon, but I don't know the landing point."

The larger of the two was likely the helicopter Euphemia and Ronaldo took from Gothic City.

"We can't enter the northern part of the city. The area is restricted to VIPs who own holiday homes there and security is tight. The helicopter seems to have landed somewhere inside there," she finished.

Haydn! Zelaide's silver hair stood on end.

"There's more," Mizelle said, shooting a frosty look at the man about to bolt from the alleyway. "But I'll leave if you don't want to hear it."

"...Tell me." Zelaide had no choice but to stop and listen to the cut and dry woman.

"I don't know where it landed, but the car that left the villa zone right after parked at the Speyer Building. The area around that building is my territory. I always have my ears pricked to catch anything out of the ordinary. The car was tinted to prevent prying eyes. But I sniffed out something strange and told the kids to keep an eye on it and the surrounding buildings. This was before Vulcan contacted me."

"Good instinct," the skinnier man said.

“Mizelle looks after the parentless Beast Blood kiddos living in this city. Ain’t she admirable?” Vulcan threw in.

Mizelle didn’t even glance his way.

“What was strange ’bout it?” Zelaide asked, also ignoring Vulcan.

“Speyer Building is home to a TV station and normally has a lot of traffic coming and going from it. Suspicious types often mix in with the other humans. It’s impossible to check every vehicle or person, but...that particular car reeked of Nightz.”

“Nightz...?”

“That’s right.” Mizelle held her IHT out for Zelaide to see for himself.

The black car captured on screen was a luxury vehicle that didn’t look suspicious. Why would this vehicle reek of Nightz?

Nightz generally didn’t have a strong odor. The smell given off by the normal stuff available on the black market could be completely hidden by human perfumes, hair products, food, sweat, and soap. But it was not odorless. If there was a large amount in one place or if it wasn’t diluted, anyone with an acute sense of smell would notice it.

And it was believed that Beast Bloods had a sense of smell several times that of humans. Experts said that while their smell wasn’t as good as a dog’s, it was much sharper than any human and some animals. Research had also shown that Beast Blood children had a better sense of smell than the adults. It’s what allowed the children to survive even without parents.

“A lot of entertainers and celebrities frequent the building and some of them do Nightz,” Mizelle explained. “But Amanda said the smell was too strong for that. Amanda has exceptionally heightened senses among the kids I look out for. Either that car is full of pure, undiluted Nightz or it was shortly before showing up here. No doubt about it.”

Zelaide silently pondered what that meant for Euphemia.

“The car stayed parked there for half a day. There were too many people and cars coming and going from Speyer Building for my kids to pick up on this Haydn man or your mate. It was even worse today because they seem to be holding some sort of event. But what I can say is that the car only headed back to the villa zone just before rainfall. One of the kids I had taking watch shifts sent me video of it leaving. I don’t know if your mate was inside or not.

This is all the information I can provide.”

Mizelle fell back and melted into the darkness created by the collapsing wall.

“What’s the plan, Silvergray?”

“I’m goin’.” Zelaide’s reply was brief. The other man’s face hardened.

“That zone’s security is topnotch.”

“Luce is right,” Vulcan chimed in. “A private militia protects that zone. They ain’t Guardian strong, but strong ’nough. Basically some rich man’s mercenary team. You’re up against a fat cat, right?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Zelaide responded and meant it.

“Charging in through the front is suicide. They don’t have machine guns, but they’re packing anti-Muta weaponry. Those things work just as well on Beast Bloods. You don’t even know how many are stationed in a single villa, much less the entire complex. Think before you act. If you truly want to save your mate, that is,” the skinny man, Luce, advised in a grave voice.

“I want to save her. Even if I have to die to do it,” Zelaide roared, his throat rumbling.

“Then it’s settled.”

The redhead nodded, followed by the other two.

“Take command, Zelaide.” Vulcan cracked a broad smile.

Zelaide lifted his chin. “I’m going to save my mate. Assist me.”

“Mission accepted.”

“Affirmative.”

The Beast Blood men accepted his request as one.

“Wahaha! Hell yeah! Bein’ able to demand a favor outta ya later is a good feelin’. Ain’t it, Luce, Leo?”

“...Hmph.”

“Oh yeah.”

The skinny man and the young redhead replied in their own ways. They were all Beast Bloods from Romanesque City.

“Leo, go get us a few more guys. Luce, you’re on weapon duty,” Vulcan ordered the men. He was the most familiar with the local area and everyone present. “I’ll take stock of what security is like in the villa zone. Zelaide, you’re with me. No rushin’ things, ya hear me?”

“...I know.”

“Mizelle, gather more intel,” Vulcan instructed the shadows.

“A lot of the residents in the villa zone are big cats, so none of the addresses are public. They’re often registered under different names. But we can’t get started if we don’t know where that car went. Likely get reported while we’re lookin’. Can any of the kids do it? Unlike us, they can blend in.”

“...Can try it,” Mizelle reluctantly agreed. “But I’m bringing them back the moment it gets dangerous.”

“Do that. Those kids are your life. Put them first. You all good on your orders? Gather back here once I give the word. There aren’t any eyes here and the back roads will get us to the north quick...” Vulcan turned from the other Beast Bloods to Zelaide when he noticed the dangerously deep lines etched into his brow. “Don’t make that face. Worrying is only gonna drain you of energy that much faster.”

It took tremendous effort for Zelaide to suppress his desire to charge in after Euphemia right away. Throwing away reason to rescue one’s mate was a natural reaction for Beast Blood males. Even more so if their woman was kidnapped. It wasn’t uncommon for a male to go into a crazed frenzy in his position.

He’s got a lot of self-control for a youngster, Vulcan thought. *And that’s why we’ve gotta be quick about this.*

“Go!”

The Beast Bloods went in four different directions letting out a howl telling the world that the Beast Bloods were on the hunt.

†††

MIZELLE contacted them in the late-afternoon.

“Amanda is tracking the car. Tire marks were found on the way to the vast mansion overlooking the forest in the mountains, located in the northernmost part of the villa zone. The rain washed away the smell of Nightz, but we’re lucky that the mountain road isn’t paved because it counts as a nature reserve. Amanda dropped Sand Limas along the way, so you shouldn’t have trouble finding it.”

Sand Limas were small legumes with an irritating odor. Adult Beast Bloods didn’t have the same sharp sense of smell as their children, but they could easily sniff out and follow the Sand Lima stench. Mizelle had thoroughly thought out a plan before sending

Amanda in.

"There were also humans hunting down the same target. I'd guess they're Gothic City Guardians by the smell of them. Can't say if they are friend or foe," Mizelle explained in an emotionless, matter-of-fact voice.

"Gothic City Guardians are on your side, right, Zelaide?" Vulcan looked over at Zelaide. "But we don't work well with humans. Thanks for your help, Mizelle."

"It's too soon to thank me. Amanda hasn't come back yet."

"She tracked down the location of a single car in that huge territory. That merits thanks enough."

"Who owns the property?" Zelaide asked with impatience. Panic flashed in his eyes.

"Don't know yet. But we were able to determine it belongs to a big player from Gothic City."

That was all he needed to hear.

"I'm goin'," Zelaide stated, fists clenched.

"Yeah, time to go. Look after the kiddos who came back, Mizelle. You don't have to fight."

"Amanda isn't back yet. I'm going too."

"....."

Zelaide tightly furrowed his brow. He wasn't used to fighting with others. Especially alongside women.

The older Beast Blood laughed and pacified him. "Don't look like the world is over, Zelaide. It's true that our kind doesn't usually work in a pack. But it's a different story when it comes to our mates. We'll band together to protect them. It's not an exaggeration to say we males live solely for our mates. This Euphemia you roared about and nearly burst the speakers on my IHT for is your mate, right?"

"...She is."

"Then this is a job for us men. It'll be a debt owed, but ya don't have to pay it."

"If we rescue Euphemia, I'll pay you back double. I'll even work with the humans... Let's move!"

"I'll remember that! But do me a favor now and don't try to be a lone hero for your woman. I won't be able to collect on your debt if you end up dead!"

"Time to go?" Leo rose from the shadows. The other Beast Bloods he contacted stood with him.

Zelaide wordlessly slid into his car and started it. He gunned it and was out of Vulcan's sight in seconds.

"Wilds be with him. He's at his limit. Not that I blame him." Vulcan got on the oxlike motorcycle that was custom built to fit his size.

The other Beast Bloods scattered to take their own routes to the villa.

"Get to cut loose for the first time in a long time. This is gonna be fun." Vulcan zoomed after his young kin with a roar.



"...**BUILDINGS** are gettin' sparse... Is this still the city?"

Romanesque City had a smaller population than Gothic City, but more than double the space. The farms and research facilities that Gothic City had to build on the city outskirts were constructed within Romanesque's shield walls.

Farmland and industrial facilities were scattered near the north outer edge of Romanesque City, and the surrounding landscape looked nothing like what one might expect to find inside one of the most advanced cities in the frontier colonies. It was the largest city on this planet when it came to surface area contained within defensive walls.

"Chwirk! Chwirk! Chwirk!"

Tipsy threw a fit in the car. The restive Muta was telling his master he wanted out after patiently sitting on the back seat for hours. Zelaide pressed the button at his fingertips and opened the sunroof. Tipsilox flew outside, brushing Zelaide's hair with his thin, membrane-like wings on the way out. He caught a good tailwind that lifted him into the sky above the car where he flew comfortably in the direction Zelaide was headed.

Before long, Zelaide saw the forest down the road. Even this massive forest was maintained within city walls. And it wasn't just any forest. It was the bulwark acting as the first line of defense for the VIPs who owned the land beyond it. Various camouflaged sensors scanned anything that approached. Unsettlingly, none of them reacted to Zelaide's car.

Did someone else take them out before he got there? He didn't have time to worry about what that could possibly entail for him up

ahead.

Euphemia is in one of these villas?

Tipsy flew to the right of the villa zone. The open sunroof instantly alerted Zelaide to why. The pungent smell of Sand Limas exuded from the right, not the villa zone.

Zelaide spun his steering wheel hard right. Vulcan followed him.

The road went up a gently sloping hill. Beautiful villas were built on the slope. Although the streetlights were on, few homes were lit because the resort season was over. The gated villas were on his left as the road took him up and around them. Shrubs grew tall on either side of the bumpy road, suggesting this path fell outside of property management's jurisdiction.

Zelaide stepped on the gas, running over the branches and vines hanging over the road. After driving around and around the hill as it took him higher, he finally came to a clearing. Located in a hill basin, the clearing was geographically positioned out of sight from the villas downhill and the road leading up to it.

A large spheric mansion unlike anything on this planet lurked in the dark clearing. At the back of the building was a dome built into the slope. The building loomed like a small mountain surrounded by high-tech walls. Dull light illuminated the foreground from the large and beautiful mansion gate.

Zelaide parked his car in the middle of a thicket some distance from the gate to avoid triggering the sensors. Tipsy sensed the danger. He flew off into the distance, avoiding the sky above the property.

Zelaide broke some branches around his car to mark where he parked. He sent the mansion location to the other Beast Bloods and, after a moment's hesitation, sent the same message to Erica with his IHT. Equipped with his favorite gun and knife, he slipped the small IHT in his inner coat pocket and got out of the car.

The night breeze alluded to the coming autumn.

Vulcan broke through the thick shrubbery and caught up to Zelaide.

"This it?"

"Looks like it," Vulcan said, scanning the area. "Surprised there's a place like this out here. No one has been allowed to map the area. Only way to find it is if you came knowin' something was 'round here and searched by copter. But they deliberately left it out

in the open without activating a shield. Keeping the shield off was a clever move. No heat signal to detect at long range.”

“...Reeks of Nightz.”

The mansion was too far away to get a feel for what was inside. But a sinister presence bled into the darkness from beyond the stalwart, gilded gate. The earthy aroma of the devil’s narcotic blended into the night breeze.

Vulcan sniffed the air. “There are all sorts of smells mixed in, but that’s the stuff. They’ve got a large stockpile somewhere.”

The property was quiet.

She’s here. Zelaide’s instincts told him Euphemia was held captive somewhere within.

His eyes gleamed.

They trudged through the thicket and avoided the road. Scaling the side wall away from the main gate was their ticket in. Clouds obscured the moon, casting shadows over the land. It was the darkest hour of night and they were in the middle of a forest. Humans would easily lose their way. But their heightened senses guided them through the dark labyrinth of trees as if they were on a pleasant hike.

“Oi, oi.” Vulcan halted.

Grass and pine masked the Sand Lima’s unique odor, but it was an altogether different scent that invaded Zelaide’s nostrils. This was a smell he was all too used to.

Blood. It reeks of blood.

The worst possible scenario chilled him. He waded through the thicket and jumped in the direction of the smell. Hundreds of nocturnal insects sprung soundlessly from the brush.

“No!”

Lying in the middle of the brush was a child bleeding from her chest. Light gleamed from her partially open eyes.

She was a Beast Blood.

“Are you still with me?!” Zelaide held the girl up in his arms. Her eyelids fluttered.

This had to be the girl Mizelle sent out. Although she was still breathing, her injuries were life-threatening. A sharp blade had slashed her diagonally from her shoulder down to her navel. Her heightened regeneration must’ve kept her alive. The blade missed her vital organs, but white fat was visible from the open gash.

“Dammit... Who did this?!”

Zelaide removed the long-sleeve shirt he wore under his jacket, ripped it into makeshift bandages, and wrapped it around the child's bleeding stomach. His large shirt easily covered the girl's wounds, but she quickly bled through it. She was on her way to dying from blood loss.

"Vulcan."

"Yeah. I'll take care of her. But it'll mean you goin' in alone."

"That was my plan from the start."

"I'll come back as soon as I hand her over to Mizelle," Vulcan said, picking up the child and melting into the dark.

The stench of blood lingered.

Zelaide continued on alone until he came upon two men collapsed on the ground. They looked like Erica's Guardians. Their injuries were severe and they were barely breathing. But Zelaide couldn't stick around to treat them. Their IHTs had been destroyed before they even hit the emergency alert button.

When Zelaide stood up, the man with his face pressed into the dirt suddenly grabbed his ankle.

"Y-You...Silver...gray." It was the captain of the Guardians who came to arrest Zelaide at City Hall, Andre Jossel. "Did you... come for...her?"

"Yeah. Sorry, but I can't save you. I'll send word to Erica at least."

"Don't...worry...about us. But...be c-careful. He's strong. U-Uses w-weird disc-like throwing weapon..." Captain Jossel's body armor was missing chunks. It was the work of a sharp blade that wasn't a knife.

"He? A single enemy?"

"Yeah...w-wearing all black...and d-dark tinted specs..."

"Got it. I'll look out for him."

"G-Go... S-Save...her."

Zelaide heard that gasped request behind him. He was already running through the woods again. While running, he pressed two numbers which sent the location coordinates and SOS text automatically to Erica again. The small IHT in his pocket buzzed a second later.

"Zelaide!"

"Erica? I'm outside the mansion now. Your guards are seriously injured. No doubt 'bout it. Yumi is here."

"Yes, there's no mistake. I researched the coordinates you sent."

It's not included in public records, but Haydn's company owns that property," Erica said.

"Smells like Nightz. And...blood." Zelaide didn't stop running. Erica was silent.

"Please...save Euphemia..." she finally said in a quiet voice.

"I swear it on my life."

Zelaide launched himself into the air by kicking off the ground. The treetops swayed loudly beneath his feet.

He was almost to the edge of the forest.

The crescent moon rose over the low mountains and breached the cloud cover.

†††

"**ZIGGURAT**, you screwed up," Burhardt said as he looked down at Euphemia sprawled on the floor. "You didn't notice because of your big car, but you were followed. By two different enemy camps. They've already sniffed this location out."

"So they have. Doesn't matter either way. They can't touch me." Haydn was unconcerned.

"You think so? Those Guardians are Saionji's elite unit."

"What are they capable of? They can't enter these grounds. The most they can do is sniff around the area like dogs. I suppose Saionji has finally determined this property belongs to me. Did you kill them?"

"They were barely breathing last I checked," Burhardt reported with indifference.

"Who's the other enemy camp?"

"It's not a group so much as a lone Beast Blood child."

"Did you say a Beast Blood youngling? Wonderful! I wonder if we can still torture them and feed them to the Muta." Haydn glanced over at the latest camera equipment covering the wall.

"I cut the child down and discarded her in the forest. The Guardians succeeded in destroying our sensors and defense system in that time. I thought things seemed odd recently. They must have suspected us for a while. Saionji is no fool. She wouldn't take this kind of risk without proof of some kind. You have gone too far. You can't expect your position to protect you forever when you use misuse it to do whatever you please without taking precautions."

"Well, it'll be a blow to lose this mansion. I hid it well, but looks like time's up. I can move to another location anytime. Not even the great Saionji can touch me once I steal the crown from her. Without her position in Gothic City, she's nothing more than a concerned citizen. Powerless. Just how much money do you think I've poured into the police and research institutes? They won't turn on me," Haydn bragged, full of confidence.

"That has worked until now. But you can't buy Beast Bloods. He's on his way here. Sand Limas are in the air. He might be scaling the walls as we speak."

"...Kill him. Torment him to death. And be sure to take high quality video of it all," Haydn ordered, restiveness creeping into his voice.

"I'd do it without you telling me to. I'm content as long as I get to kill him...kill Silvergray," Burhardt said coldly.

"Zel?" Euphemia stirred awake and lifted her head off the floor. She had lost consciousness after Burhardt showed up. "... Director Burhardt..."

The appearance of her trustworthy boss had filled Euphemia's emerald eyes with hope, but the words died on her lips before the frigid eyes that stared down at her. He had shown up right before she fainted and given her a look colder than death itself.

"I see you've come to, Mia. Yes, it's me."

Burhardt looked completely different from her levelheaded boss who always wore a white lab coat. Black leather clothes, dark tinted specs. If it wasn't for his name, she would've never recognized him. His voice, more than his name, was what forced Euphemia to acknowledge it.

"Director... Why? How could you do something so...so horrible?" she accused.

"Director, huh? That identity lasted a long time. I had grown quite fond of it. I can't go back to it now... Too bad."

"I'll give you another identity," Haydn offered. "In the meantime, hold back those Beast Bloods, Shank. Killing them all will eliminate any solid evidence against me. The rest will work out on its own. I have accumulated that much power and influence over the world."

"Shank? You're Shank...Director? I don't believe it."

Shock widened Euphemia's emerald eyes. Her head shook weakly as if fighting to accept it.

Shank was the name that came up from the very beginning as the frightening man leading both Infernum and Vermis. Every day Euphemia went to work alongside that dreadful crime lord.

“No way...” she breathed.

“It’s one of many names I go by, but yes, I am Shank,” Burhardt said without inflection. Did any emotion show in the eyes hidden behind his dark specs?

“Y-You’re the o-one who...f-framed Zel for murder....” she stuttered, emotions getting the better of her.

Burhardt closely assessed Euphemia. His thin lips curled into a merciless sneer. “Indeed, that was my failed attempt. I’ve been so long without a woman, I didn’t account for the lack of sperm.”

“...Coward... I trusted you...” she hissed.

“What are you going to do with this woman?” Burhardt asked Haydn, leaving Euphemia unanswered.

“I’ll play with her until she becomes an obedient doll. There are plenty of ways to break a person.”

“Your perversion never ceases to amaze. Well, it’s no concern of mine. Do what you wish with her.” Burhardt—Shank—slowly looked around the room. “This is not a good place to fight. I’ll pick a good spot and wait for him to come to me.”

A slight smile touched Shank’s lips as he turned his back on Euphemia. That was no longer the back of the kindhearted researcher she knew. It was the broad back of a man going to fight—much like she had often seen in Zelaide.

“Wait! Don’t go yet, Director Burhardt!”

“...What is it?” Shank turned around and watched with amusement as Euphemia pushed herself off the ground and managed to stand on swaying legs.

The large monitors behind her cast a shadow on her face, but Shank easily saw her desperation. On the monitors, the footage of Euphemia being attacked replayed for the thousandth time.

Shank pulled a short steel spike from the leather holder on his chest and threw it at Euphemia.

She ducked with a small cry as the black spike whooshed passed her ear. The stagnant room was shaken by shattering glass.

The strangely shaped steel spike stuck out of the largest monitor directly behind Euphemia.

“What did you do?!” Haydn roared.

“They will be here soon. You can’t let yourself be distracted by

that,” Shank said flatly.

Boots pounded the floor outside the door. The door should have been locked, but three armed guards rushed into the room after using the emergency release code. They were Haydn’s private bodyguards.

“President! Are you safe?!” shouted the leader pointing a gun at Shank. The other two guards positioned themselves in front of Haydn. “We only allowed this man inside because you permitted it.”

“Nothing’s wrong. We just had a slight disagreement.”

“You should send this man away. He’s dangerous.”

Shank let the leader’s threatening gaze wash over him like a spring breeze.

“Take your men and intercept the Beast Bloods heading here,” Haydn ordered.

“Beast Bloods?”

“Beast Bloods are headed here?”

The bodyguards panicked.

“They are. This man told me that Beast Bloods with a grudge against me are on their way. I’m going to evacuate into the inner area with this girl. Two of you come with me. The rest are to work with Shank to eliminate every single Beast Blood foolish enough to come into my domain. You can kill them. Actually, do kill them. I’ll be filming the whole thing so we will have evidence that it was legitimate self-defense.”

Nervous tension ran through the guards, but they filed out of the room at their leader’s command. They were headed to give orders to the rest of the guard team.

“What are you people thinking? Murder is wrong! You won’t get away with any of this!” Euphemia yelled at their backs.

“Get away with it? This is an act of self-defense,” Haydn demurred. “I didn’t think you had much energy left to shout. Guess that should be expected of your stubbornness, huh? I can’t have you throwing a fit on me. I’ll make you nice and quiet...with the highest quality Nightz.”

“Nightz?!”

“Yes, Nightz. Allow me to show you a supreme dream.”

“S-So you were the main source behind Gothic City’s Nightz problem!”

“No, no. I’m not so arrogant as to take credit for that. The

main problem lies in weak humans who rely on narcotics. I merely gave them the option. I will become the king of this world after I burn away all the trash that readily relied on narcotics. Becoming mayor of Gothic City is just a step in that direction.”

“Pretending to be the savior of the problem you caused? Devil!”

“Aah! Those eyes! I have been longing to see those eyes burning with anger. Clouding them over with drugs will be such a waste. But it must be done. You will be out of it until I can drag Saionji down by announcing her biological sister is a Nightz addict. It won’t take long. Then I can see those eyes again. Come along then. Time for your injection.”

“NO! Let go! Zel! Zel!”

Shank silently watched Haydn drag Euphemia out of the room.

“I don’t make a habit of fighting alongside humans, but...the situation calls for it...” He removed his tinted specs and tossed them aside. His right eye glowed like a cold, blue flame. “Come, Silvergray... Death awaits.”



I’M almost to the forest’s edge. Only a few hundred feet to go!

Zelaide’s surroundings suddenly turned into a beautifully maintained garden promenade. Decorative iron-wrought streetlights and elaborately pruned trees neatly lined the walkway under the indigo sky. But this was no public park—it was Haydn’s private estate.

Immediately after he walked into the small flower-filled plaza, something sharp cut through the quiet late-summer evening and echoed in his eardrums.

Gunshots!

Came from the north...inside the mansion! Yumi!

He couldn’t afford to worry about tripping the sensors anymore. Zelaide ran like lightning toward the white wall towering ahead of him. The wall was too high for a private villa. It was more suited to a high-security facility.

The mansion was constructed to go higher as it followed the sloping mountain, and it ended in a semicircular dome built right into the mountainside.

Gettin' over this wall comes first.

Something dry cracked the air at his feet. If he had been running even a little slower, he would've taken a bullet to the leg.

Zelaide shot out his right arm, releasing his wrist wire into the tree in front of him and using it as a fulcrum to pull him horizontally through the air. It whipped his body around at an almost complete right angle turn. Bullets blew holes in the pavement.

There!

Snipers always targeted from high ground.

With his bird's eye view, Zelaide spotted two watchtowers sandwiching the main gate. Snipers aimed at him from both. He'd never infiltrate the mansion if he kept getting shot at from above.

I'll silence this side first.

Zelaide swung under the tower on the left. Putting his back against the wall made it hard for them to shoot him from the right, but left him open to being sniped from above. He fired the wire hook into the tower's angled roof and used its powerful contraction force and his feet to scale the tower in a zigzag motion. Bullets grazed his hair, shredding it. Several more passed through his billowing coat. But the snipers weren't skilled enough to land a direct hit on a moving target.

In less than a minute, he scaled the sixty-five foot tower and swung onto the platform, plunging his feet into the face of one sniper. The sniper's rifle flew from his grasp and onto the ground below. He lost his balance and fell off the turret platform.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" His scream echoed the whole sixty-five feet down.

The other sniper, who was too busy gaping to do anything, took Zelaide's fist to the nose. He landed hard on top of the narrow platform. Blood gushed from his broken nose and split-open lips, staining the decorative white tile. He wore gear from the Romanesque City Guardians, but he was still too young to be on the force. The sheer difference in power robbed him of the will to fight back.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Bullets sprayed the pillar behind them. Snipers fired on Zelaide from the opposite tower. Zelaide grabbed the young man by the neck and moved forward with him as a meat shield.

Fire temporarily ceased as the other guards hesitated to shoot

one of their own. Zelaide used that opportunity to lift his gun and fire on them.

He only fired off a few shots, but each hit their mark. Blood sprayed in the distance. It wasn't a high-caliber gun, but it dealt a fatal blow if aimed right. Zelaide couldn't stay still long enough to judge if he had taken them down. There should've been at least two shooters in the other tower, but they had stopped firing on him. By the look of things outside, it was unlikely the mansion had many guards. Zelaide was in luck. Being a Beast Blood only made him superhuman not invincible. Maybe Haydn wasn't expecting a full-scale attack this soon.

Zelaide jumped from the tower.

He landed on the wall first before hopping into the shadow of the leafy shrubs below. The sun had set, leaving no natural light. Floodlights kicked on in the garden. Two wide circles of light from the right and left exposed him. Bullets rained down from above. He rolled on top of the soft grass, escaping the cadence by the skin of his teeth. Back on his feet, he fired at the bright lights as he ran. He wouldn't miss this shot with his eyes closed. With a loud crack, the area was bathed in darkness once more.

Darkness gave Beast Bloods an advantage. At the price of not seeing in color, they saw the finer details of what was in the dark. If anything, their senses heightened with the lack of color and light.

Zelaide, who managed to get under the eaves of the building while the enemy was stunned, broke a large stained glass window and charged inside the mansion as glass fell around him.

Haydn likely held Euphemia captive in the dome at the back of the mansion.

Zelaide rushed through a series of hallways before exiting into a spacious greenhouse with a skylight ceiling. The only way forward was through the greenhouse.

Someone stepped out of the shadows on the other side of the massive room. Their silhouette wasn't that big, but cold, silver light radiated from their right eye.

It was a Beast Blood.

†Chapter 9: Fight to the Death†

THE man in the shadows watched Zelaide with one glowing eye.

“You...I know you,” Zelaide breathed, controlling the anger in his voice.

“That you do. I also know you...very well.”

“...You’re a Beast Blood?”

Burhardt—Shank—answered with a thin smile. “Only half.”

“Half?”

“That’s right.”

Mating between Beast Bloods and humans was possible. The likelihood of a child being born of their union was small, but not impossible. However, almost all the children turned out to be pure Beast Blood. Half-breeds didn’t exist. Extensive research had proved it.

“You can’t tell from this eye?” Shank pointed to his one glowing eye. “I am on par with the rest of you when it comes to physical strength, but as you can see, my appearance is entirely human aside from my right eye. That is what has allowed me to live among the humans my entire life—all while I cursed this wretched blood coursing through my veins.”

Shank was short and skinny even by average human male standards. His teeth weren’t sharp and pointed. Bathed in the afternoon light, he looked like a cordial gentleman. But he wasn’t one.

“You curse Beast Bloods despite being one?”

“My mother was human. But not my father’s mate. By giving birth to me, a child no different from a human, my mother was abandoned by my father. Rejected by human society as well, she took her own life. It happened more than fifty years ago though!”

Shank lunged at Zelaide before he finished speaking. He released several circular weapons with sharpened outer edges. One cut through Zelaide’s shoulder and came back around to Shank’s hand after making a sharp loop.

“GUAH!”

“Hahaha! That’s the spot the Bijour got you last time. Thank you for putting on such an entertaining show for me to watch through the security cameras. Granted, you were just following Murakami’s script.”

The thin, round blade ran with precision through the healing wound, reopening it. Blood dripped down Zelaide’s arm onto his fingertips.

“...Bastard!”

“I modified a surgical blade into a chakram,” Shank said as he spun the circular blade around his index finger. The cold light from his right eye reflected off the blade. “I’m a biologist and a doctor. I specialize in handling scalpels. The blade itself is on the smaller side, but it cuts through flesh better than a knife. Worked wonders on your shoulder, didn’t it?”

“Are you the one who killed Manuela?” Zelaide seethed.

“Of course I did. Haydn planned on framing you as the murderer and filming you getting tortured to death in prison, but that wasn’t very fun for me. So I let Murakami’s plan work without interference. Haydn went raging mad, but aren’t you glad you get to be killed by me here instead?”

Zelaide ground his teeth. Flying into a rage would put him at a disadvantage.

“In any case, your stupidity astounds me,” Shank continued. “I dropped so many hints that I was targeting you both. That foolish woman wouldn’t listen. I even went so far as to use a precious Chude embryo—and she still didn’t notice. I nearly died of boredom.”

“...Why were you targeting us?” Zelaide asked.

“I was contracted to do so, just like you.”

“Your client is this mansion’s owner?”

“Correct. The other reason is personal. I wanted to fight you to the death after driving you to the brink, just like this!”

With Shank’s signal, bullets rained down from every angle.

“...Tch!”

“I don’t want to fight alongside humans, but I’m at a physical disadvantage, so I’ll let them wear you down first. Not like they can kill you anyway. Go on. Run, beastly, run. Hahaha!” Shank belted out a deep, rumbling laugh.

Zelaide jumped back, but the bullets came in rapid succession. There were at least three shooters stationed on the catwalk circling

the greenhouse for an aerial view of the plants. He escaped the bullets by rolling on the floor and launching himself off the wall.

Shank threw his weird weapon into the mix whenever he saw an opening. Zelaide could only run—he couldn't find an opening to counterattack. But he didn't sustain a single new injury.

Scowling, Shank caught the circular blade when it returned and spun it on his finger. "Hah... No wonder you take so much pride in your fast legs. But how long can you keep this up?"

Shank spun around and sent two chakrams flying after him.

Zelaide dodged the first and shot down the second. Bullets continued to pelt the floor around him, busting the tiles, walls, plants, and furniture. He tried to escape through the door leading out of the room, but a spray of bullets forced him back.

"Shit...I can't get outta here." Panic rushed in on him. "DAMN IT ALL!" Zelaide howled louder than the bullets.

And, as if summoned by his howl, the glass ceiling shattered.

"Uwah!"

"The hell?!"

Five men smashed through the ceiling and plunged into the greenhouse, along with falling shards of glass.

"Yo! I have such good timing! Go me!"

"Vulcan! You're late!" Zelaide shouted.

"Don't be stupid. I rushed here so fast I didn't even stop to take a piss!" Vulcan hollered.

Luce, Leo, and two men Zelaide didn't know dropped behind him.

"I'm Maiti. I'm here to help!"

"The name's Ludo. I owed Vulcan a favor."

Zelaide's reinforcements smiled.

"Don't they look dependable? We'll handle things here, so scurry off to your mate! I'll make it so you owe me big for this," Vulcan smirked.

"Found loads of Nightz packed in a truck parked inside the mansion! And a warehouse with piles of dried Night Blooms in the garden!" Luce bounded into the air, snapping his long whip on the ground.

"Now go! Run for your mate!" Leo fired his twin pistols at the same time.

The Beast Bloods charged in the respective directions of their prey, brandishing their weapons of choice, dodging between the

plants to take out anyone with a gun. An all-out melee ensued, kicking up gun smoke and debris from the shattered ceiling. Several dozen screams rose from within the chaos.

“Hold your horses there, buster.”

“...Move.”

It was none other than Vulcan who blocked Shank from chasing after Zelaide.

“I’ll play with you... Might not be as fun for ya though.”

“...Tch!” Showing signs of anger for the first time, Shank unleashed the chakram from his fingers.

“Go!” Vulcan glanced over at Zelaide and grinned. The other Beast Bloods each gave their own signs of approval as they clashed with the enemy.

Accepting his kin’s assistance, Zelaide bolted out of the oversized greenhouse and down the hallway heading deeper into the massive mansion.

Another shooter sniped at him from behind one of the many doors lining the walls. Zelaide opened a different door and used it as a shield. Once the shooting stopped, he charged the shooter, knocking him over with the door. Even the sturdiest wood door was nothing more than scrap when rammed with all the force of an ox.

As he proceeded, various defense systems and enemies got in his way, but Zelaide only thought of getting to Euphemia.

The mansion shed its classic, elegant looks for more constructive ones the further he advanced. A sensor in the walls triggered, activating a shield blocking the way forward. He plunged into it with his IHT. The moment the energy field came in contact with the device, a very expensive and illegal hack sent a pulse into the shield, short-circuiting it. That triggered a bulkhead to lower, which he slid under just in time before it sealed.

Then, at last, a round door came into view at the end of the never-ending hallway.

Every cell in his body sensed it—his mate was just past that door.

Just a little further. Yumi is right ahead!

†††

ZELAIDE hurtled through the double doors into another insanely

large open space. The rooms before it didn't even compare in size.

The Wilds spread out in every direction. Did he accidentally exit the building?

No, on second look, it wasn't the Wilds. To be precise, it was a habitat that recreated the Wilds on a smaller scale indoors. While the greenhouse was a manicured garden with flowerbeds and walkways, this space let nature take its course untouched.

The ceiling was an all-sky dome, and although it was currently the middle of the night, a light-blue spring sky was shown instead of the stars. Rugged wastelands, grasslands, and deep green forestry resembling the Sea of Trees surrounded him.

Zelaide's attention was drawn to several towering rock formations on the opposite side of the dome, the tallest of which nearly pierced the ceiling.

This space was elaborately crafted to mess with the senses, confusing visitors into not knowing what was real and what was being projected by advanced projectors and screens.

A gentle breeze caressed Zelaide's sweaty cheeks.

"What in the seven Wilds is this place?!" Zelaide was rightly astounded by the huge space that preyed on the senses.

His eyes were drawn to the plethora of Night Blooms covering half the grasslands inside the dome.

Despite the flowering season having already ended and the fact they were being bathed in sunlight, the glowing petals didn't lose their luminescence. All of these flowers bore the fruit that was the raw material of the terrifying narcotic Nightz.

RUSTLE. RUSTLE.

The air control system strengthened the wind current, swaying the field of flowers.

To an outsider, it would be an enchanting spectacle to behold. Zelaide marched on, unmoved, trampling the alluring flowers underfoot.

The winds quieted down and clouds crossed over an artificial sky that began to shift away from the light of day as it slowly darkened. A night cycle had been triggered. The Night Blooms emitted an even brighter light. Temperature and humidity were perfectly controlled by the automated environment control system. It even controlled weather patterns such as rain and snow.

Zelaide stood in the middle of the artificial beauty. Eyes closed, he felt the wind in his hair.

Closing off his visual perception helped him search for any life inside this dome where the very air was controlled by the enemy. Concentration fully honed, he sensed several living creatures.

She's here! Zelaide's skin tingled. His eyes flew open. Those silver pupils shined brighter than the Night Blooms. Every cell in his body reacted to his mate's close proximity. *She's on the farthest rock mountain!*

"Yumi! EUPHEMIA!" Zelaide yelled. "Yumi! I'm here!"

His voice echoed back from every direction. The dome's diameter was impossible to estimate. How many enemies were left lying in wait was a mystery. Nobody responded to his voice.

Beast Bloods had impeccable vision. But he didn't see a single soul near or around the mountain where he sensed Euphemia. That could only mean she was locked up somewhere out of sight within that mountain. There was nowhere else a person could hide.

Then, in the distance, Zelaide heard gunfire. He sprinted through the simulated Sea of Trees only to pass a Bijour charging through the branches with a human leg still in its mouth.

Zelaide quickly snapped out his wrist wire and swung up into the trees in hot pursuit of the Bijour that was charging another stumbling guard.

"Stay away!" the guard screamed, firing his gun before grabbing a grenade from his belt with shaky hands. In his panic, he pulled the pin out and threw the explosive at the charging Bijour.

BOOM!

The Bijour vanished in the explosion. Yet the tenacious reptile stumbled out of the dust cloud bleeding but still not dead. Its snapping jaw inched closer to the guard who stood too dumbfounded to shoot.

BANG! A single shot finished off the Bijour.

"Entertained? Definitely is somethin' to see alright."

"...!"

Fear filled the bleeding guard's eyes when he shakily turned around. The Beast Blood was right behind him. He was a greenhorn barely out of training. It didn't matter how good his gear was if he didn't have the experience to use it.

"I'll give ya a chance to live," Zelaide whispered like the devil to the glassy-eyed young man. "Where is she...?"

"...I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die," he repeated, fear stricken.

"I swear I'll let ya live... You just have to pretend I killed ya

and play dead up in the trees. All you gotta do is tell me where she is. Where are they in this dome?”

That deep, rumbling whisper sounded awfully kind to the terrified young man.

“T-Tallest rock mountain...c-control room’s inside...he’s in there with her—GHH!” The young man lost consciousness. He had taken a direct hit to the back of the neck from Zelaide’s hand chop.

“See, I didn’t lie. I knocked ya out instead of killin’ you.”

Zelaide gazed up at the majestic rock mountain visible between the trees. How tall was it really?

The sky behind it turned a deep shade of red, dyeing the rock surface red.

That was going to be the stage of the final battle.

†††

ZELAIDE took the time to recover during the short hike through the now quiet forest. In what felt like minutes, he stood before the tallest rock mountain.

The footing was bad, but still climbable. He would be defenseless while climbing. Getting sniped in the back would knock him right off. But he didn’t hesitate to do what needed to be done. His superior physical strength got him halfway up the mountainside in no time.

CRUNCH!

He stomped on the hidden cameras made to look like rocks.

Nobody has shot me down yet. Out of shooters already?

Midway up the mountain, Zelaide noticed a deep crack running through the rocky surface. It extended artificially in a straight line and seemed like something capable of opening and closing. Some sort of room was located within.

This is it.

From the looks of it, it couldn’t have been too spacious inside. As Zelaide contemplated how to infiltrate, the answer came from the other side. A part of the rock face extended out and began to protrude into the air as if it were a balcony.

Now what?

Zelaide cautiously watched from where he clung to the mountain side. The balcony jutted out of the bare rock wall thirty

feet before stopping.

Two machine guns were equipped to the balcony railing. Probably there for Haydn to take part in whatever sick scenarios he wrote up from the safety of his high tower. They were small caliber guns, but taking a few hits would still kill a person or adventurous Muta. Knowing Haydn, he purposely chose low caliber machine guns that would lengthen the time he had to torture a person to death. There were even chairs set up on the balcony for him to sit back and enjoy watching the people suffering in agony below.

Zelaide slowly climbed around the rocks until he came down just over the balcony. From where he clung to the mountain, he had a perfect view of the balcony and the entire dome.

“Yumi! Euphemia!”

His voice bounced off the rocks and throughout the expansive interior landscape. By the time the echoing stopped, he sensed someone move within the mountain.

“Oh, you were up there? Come on down. Your precious lady is right here.”

Some of the rocks were actually speakers. He heard Haydn’s voice all around him.

Zelaide dropped onto the balcony. Just as he expected, there was a control room with dozens of monitors and machines installed in the back part of the balcony. In all likelihood, Haydn adjusted the dome environment and edited videos there. A luxurious sofa and loveseat set took up the center of the room. This was his viewing spot.

But Zelaide had eyes for only one thing.

“Yumi...”

He stared at the petite figure curled in a ball at the stout man’s feet. Euphemia—his beloved mate.

“Yumi!”

Zelaide froze midrun—the man had the sharp conical tip of his thin, long rapier pressed precisely against Euphemia’s neck. The man cracked a self-satisfied smile when he saw he had effectively sealed Zelaide’s movement.

“Will you quit calling the treasure I finally obtained by that classless nickname? I won’t ask you a second time. Your kind may be lacking brains, but you should at least be able to get that through your thick skull.”

“Get away from Yumi,” Zelaide roared like a ferocious beast.

Even the big shot businessman cringed.

“.....”

“Move.”

“.....”

Haydn scrunched up his face, almost as if bracing himself to face a monster, and he purposely flexed his legs to show he wasn't moving from that spot.

Infuriated from being made into a fool, Zelaide yelled, “Now! Or I'll tear you apart!”

“...Trying to threaten me? I won't falter. For I am Ziggurat Haydn, and I fight on the side of justice! I know you have come to kidnap this pitiful young lady. But I won't let a cowardly Beast Blood's violence go unchecked! Shoot me if you must! Shoot me! I will fight you to the bitter end to save her!”

Haydn sounded like he was reading off a badly written script.

“Come at me, Beast Blood! This old man will fight you!”

“Shut the hell up! What're you goin' on and on 'bout?”

Zelaide realized something was amiss with the sudden, uncharacteristic change in Haydn. There was something more hinging on this poorly orchestrated hero act. Zelaide shoved back his anger and fell silent, no longer taking the bait. Haydn continued shouting a stream of sappy one-liners on his own until he grew tired of it and faced Zelaide with an exaggerated wave of hands.

“Cut! How was that?” Haydn signaled his editor hiding somewhere and smirked. In an instant, the sham hero façade vanished and the twisted gentleman returned.

“...Give me Yumi. You're finished,” Zelaide said, keeping his voice calmer than before.

“Finished? What gave you that idea?”

“You manufactured Nightz and spread 'em around the cities in order to dispose of Mayor Saionji. The evidence is blatant. Night Blooms are growing in this dome you own as well. And you kidnapped the mayor's sister on top of all that. What other proof is needed to finish you?”

“Nightz? Oh, you mean the Night Blooms growing here? Aren't they beautiful? By controlling the light, temperature, and moisture, I can make them stay in bloom all year long. Gazing upon flowers is another one of my hobbies. There's nothing wrong with enjoying flowers. The seeds and narcotics outside were all seized from criminal organizations as evidence by my detectives. I should be

highly praised for the successful recovery of a dangerous narcotic. As for this young lady, she is only here because she agreed to partake in one of my movies.”

Haydn fondly lowered his gaze. Euphemia’s eyelids were stark white and firmly closed. She didn’t have a jacket on, but she was clothed. Her hair had come undone from a bun and hung messily around her face. The specs she always wore were missing.

“That’s some shitty chop logic given the way things look,” Zelaide countered, then turned his full attention on his mate. “... Yumi! Wake up! It’s me! Zelaide!”

Euphemia’s shoulders twitched on the floor. An agonized sigh escaped her lips.

“Yumi! You bastard! You injected her with Nightz!” Zelaide gritted his teeth against the fragrance wafting from her body. “Perverted psycho!”

“Me? I wouldn’t know. She had a lot to drink. Perhaps it was the alcohol? Speaking of which, she flew into a drunken rage earlier. I had to teach her manners.” Haydn slapped Euphemia’s butt with the side of his rapier.

“The hell did you do?” Zelaide hissed through clenched teeth, aware cameras were still on him.

A lewd smile warped Haydn’s face. “It was wonderful... She suffered and experienced pleasure.”

The rapier’s tip ripped Euphemia’s cuff. Dark-red fingerprints left a deep mark on her wrist.

A roaring howl ripped from the depths of Zelaide’s throat. The rumbling roar echoed through the dome, shaking the very air. Haydn clapped in appreciation.

“Ooh... Is that a Beast Blood’s war cry? Perfect for television. I wonder how well the top quality microphones picked it up. Will speakers even be able to replay it the same way?”

“Move.”

“.....”

The Beast Blood’s roar made the hair on the back of Haydn’s neck stand up. But he didn’t move. Nor did he remove his rapier from the unconscious woman.

Zelaide took one step forward. Then another. And then he lunged!

“ARGHHH!”

He was repelled by an invisible wall into the balcony railing.

Burnt silver hairs scattered into the artificial wind. His forearm burned from contact with the invisible shield.

“Shame on you. Did you think I would provoke a savage like you without ample protection? Anti-beast defenses are always on.” Haydn snickered on the other side of the invisible wall.

“This is the best seat in the house to view the various events held in this dome. On occasion, there’s a brute like you who charges in without thinking or a stray bullet. A man has to protect himself. A word to the wise, don’t think you can get through the shield with your fighting spirit or that worthless little tool you’ve got. As you can see, the other shield you interacted with was a civilian model, this one is Guardian grade. Quite illegal for the common masses to own, but I, of course, am an exception. You will turn into a charred piece of meat if you try to force your way through this one. Not that I would mind seeing that happen too. But you know, the longer this goes, the more entertaining it gets.”

“Go to hell! Yumi, wake up!” Zelaide shouted as he rose to his feet clutching his burnt arm. Euphemia’s fingertips twitched.

“Yes, yes. This is turning out quite well indeed. Yes, I think it’s better to edit this separately.” Haydn seemed truly entertained as he looked up at the top monitors.

“Now then, let’s move this along. I have to return to Gothic City and submit a legislative bill to the next senate meeting. One proposing the unconditional internment of Beast Bloods. Not even Saionji will be able to oppose it once I show them this video. You destroyed several of my cameras, but I have plenty of footage and it’s all in the cloud. Footage showing Beast Bloods breaking into a patriotic senator’s home and slaughtering the guards who bravely tried to fend them off.”

In other words, his heroic act a few minutes ago was a role play for the cameras. He planned on editing the footage from the night into a campaign video.

“We didn’t kill your people because we wanted to. You forced this situation on us. We purposely missed their vitals when we could. And you’re more of a savage than we’ll ever be. You fed your own men to the Bijour.”

“None of that matters in the pursuit of perfection in film.” All expression suddenly vanished from Haydn’s round face. “Beast Bloods shouldn’t exist. I’m doing what is needed to erase them.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“This planet exists for humanity. Do you comprehend how much we have gone through to preserve our species? Ever since mankind moved to this world from the old world, the genes we carefully selected have reverted back to their former mixed state over the centuries. All that work they went through selecting the best of the best in order to create a wonderful world of only superior humans has gone to waste. Now those ideal genetics are gone and the people have even forgotten it existed!” Haydn languished, throwing his arms out.

“It didn’t take long for the humans who settled on this planet to breed with the indigenous people, defiling the ideal gene pool. And with each successive generation, humans fell into depravity, art was lost, and crime spread. Chromosome aberrations are only increasing with time. We are reverting to a state worse than what we left behind.”

Insanity colored the man’s eyes and crimson stained his ashen cheeks. Haydn glared at Zelaide as if he were possessed.

“It is unforgivable for filth to mix in with the genes that have been carefully selected. It will eventually cause humanity’s decline. Someone has to clean it up before it is too late. So I came up with a plan to stop it. By spreading drugs, I can narrow down who the weak humans are and eliminate them for good. The same goes for the money mongers who are blinded by wealth. Granting citizenship to Beast Bloods? Ludicrous. Beast Bloods just have to fight to the death with the Vermi and Inferni I created—what?” Startled, Haydn looked down at his feet.

Euphemia tightened her hand around his ankle.

“Yumi!” Zelaide instinctively stepped forward.

Her pain-glazed eyes focused on him and a faltering smile spread on her cracked lips. She then returned her gaze back to Haydn.

“You woke up? You have a remarkable force of will to push through all the drugs I injected you with. As expected of the woman who fascinates me.”

“Y-You are...wrong. There is no such thing as perfect...genes.”

Ugh. My brain and tongue feels numb...

Euphemia knew she’d been injected with drugs. But it didn’t cause her pleasure—only intense sleepiness. Even after waking up, the whole world spun and she felt sick to her stomach. It was worse than a hangover. With sheer force of will, she pushed herself up on

trembling elbows. She couldn't stand letting him capture more footage of her sprawled out on the floor like a drug addict.

"...We are all human beings, stupidity and cleverness included. No one has the right to choose what makes someone better than another. There's no right end point for humanity to obtain," Euphemia argued vehemently. The fog slowly lifted from her mind as she spoke.

"Mankind is full of possibilities. No matter the time or the planet, we live to our fullest, make mistakes, right our mistakes, and make mistakes again without learning our lesson. But we are an unbelievably tenacious and tough species. Otherwise humanity would have gone extinct ages ago... Those superior genes you speak of have long since died off. What you have left are the tougher humans who survived in the colonies without their cradle world to support them."

"Heh. Now that is a novel theory. Try not to hurt that empty head of yours by speaking, Euphemia. Are you suggesting that superior genes are destined to go extinct?"

"...No. The best will remain in future generations. Just as was proven by the Mongolian gerbils. Give them a little time in the wild and they will interbreed with other gerbils, leaving behind a stronger generation. My research has taught me how strong living creatures—AGH!" Searing pain caused Euphemia to curl in on herself.

Haydn's rapier tip pierced her soft calf. "You ignorant sow! Don't you dare compare ideal human genetics with rodents!"

"YUMI!" Zelaide's roar cracked the air. He crouched to lunge at Haydn.

"Don't!" Euphemia yelled back, her cry not losing out to his.

Zelaide froze in place.

"I won't forgive you if you come!" she shouted. "Look twice before you charge in! I was only pretending to be unconscious. I saw what just happened. Do you want to become a roast Beast Blood by charging in head first? No one wants to eat charred Beast Blood!"

"Yumi..."

Even Haydn did a double take before her clearheaded scolding. Euphemia looked at the rapier lodged in her calf and snorted.

"A bug bite hurts more than this flimsy thing! I'm actually grateful he stabbed me because it gave me a clear mind. He's only

cutting into my excess fat anyway. No biggie. Besides, I'm thick-skinned and drugs don't work well on me! Nightz are no worse than a sedative! But hey, at least this finally made this lowlife's gentlemanly mask fall off, revealing the scum beneath!"

"Hahaha! Excellent...truly excellent. You truly are a wonderful video subject. Your constantly changing expressions can't be taught. Too bad your stupidity ruins the overall package..." Haydn dug the rapier in and turned it as he spoke.

Face twisting with pain, Euphemia swallowed her screams and squeezed her hands together as her whole body convulsed.

"GRAAAAAAAH!"

Witnessing his mate suffering, the Beast Blood fell to his knees, his head tilted back with a sorrowful roar, and scraped his claws over the floor, ripping up chunks of the balcony. Red lines ran through the gleaming eyes locked on his mate.

"Yumi! YUMI! You piece of shit! I'll kill you!"

"Z-Zel! I-I'm...o-okay... I'm doing okay!" Shoulders rising and falling with her heavy panting, Euphemia smiled reassuringly at Zelaide. Sweat drenched her ashen face.

"Yumi... I'm comin' to you even if it means turning to charcoal —"

"Zelaide Silvergray! I forbid you from coming!"

Ordered by his mate, the Beast Blood stopped mid-lunge. Her emerald eyes burned into him. It was only those eyes that restrained the Beast Blood.

"Yu—"

"I will be fine..." Euphemia pushed back the pain and smiled without shaking.

Dammit! Find a way! Frantically suppressing his anger before it made him run wild, Zelaide ran his eyes around the control room, looking for a hole in the defenses he could exploit. Haydn watched him, enthralled by his suffering and desperation.

"Go ahead and search to your heart's content. We will leisurely await the police's arrival from here. You will look like an intruder to anyone who comes."

"I'll testify against you!" Euphemia rasped.

"Your sweat and urine will test positive for Nightz. That will make your testimony void. Leave everything to me. I will take down your sister, but I won't do anything bad to you."

"...Go to hell."

“Speaking of people bound for hell...” Haydn watched the Beast Blood searching for an entry point with amusement. “I suppose Shank and the others failed, seeing as this Beast Blood made it this far. I was hoping to get some entertaining footage of two Beast Bloods killing each other. Useless.”

“You called?”

†††

A Beast Blood with one glowing eye smoothly dropped onto the balcony railing.

The dome darkened.

False night with deeper blues than the real night sky had arrived. The Night Bloom petals blazed in the distance. Wind swayed the false Sea of Trees. Shank stood with the simulated Wilds against his back.

“It’s a mess back there. This wouldn’t have happened if the private soldiers you hired were a little more helpful. I at least dealt an equally fatal blow to the Beast Blood ranks,” Shank reported, expressionless as he looked at Haydn twirling his rapier in Euphemia’s calf.

“Bastard! You killed them?!” Zelaide growled.

“Can’t say for sure... If they’re lucky enough, they probably survived,” Shank replied, launching into the air without even bending his knees.

Zelaide promptly fired on him. Shank kicked off the railing and landed dead center of the balcony, unharmed. The strength of his kick propelled him at lightning speed. It was hard even for Zelaide to track his movement.

A flicker of light shot out of his afterimage. He had thrown one of his moon-shaped weapons—the chakram.

Zelaide dodged right and fired where he thought Shank would land next. His aim was off by an inch. Valuable bullets were decreasing with each missed shot.

“...So close.” Shank laughed as multiple chakrams spun on his fingers.

Vexed, Zelaide sunk his fangs into his lip.

He’s supposed to be weaker than me physically? Ha. Son of a Bijour bluffed.

Zelaide tightened his grip on the gun. Only two bullets left. Shank didn't have a gun. But the holders on his thigh were packed with strange steel rods and more of those round blades he spun like discs. What other unseen weapons was he packing?

"You're still young," Shank said quietly. "Brute force isn't enough to defeat me."

"...We'll see 'bout that!"

Zelaide launched himself off the marble floor, closing the distance in one long stride. His first shot missed; his second just barely grazed the tip of Shank's boot. This was the first time he had ever missed at this distance.

"Out of bullets?" Shank smiled.

"...Not the end of the world." Zelaide tossed his gun. It clanged loudly on the marble. Before the echo stopped, he lunged at Shank with his knife in the reverse hand grip.

CLANG!



Shank blocked with a nightstick. In his right hand, he held a double-edged knife with a blade thinner than Zelaide's.

They clashed blades repeatedly. Zelaide had a bigger physique, giving him a size advantage. But Shank fought on par with him. Zelaide clenched his jaw whenever he lashed out with his knife, while Shank's expression remained placid.

Steel crashed against steel.

"I hate you," Shank said, his voice quiet and even.

"What a coincidence. I hate you too," Zelaide responded with vitriol.

"You don't understand why, do you?"

"I don't give a damn!"

Another violent exchange of blows started. They constantly changed their footing, parted, drew near—the two men dizzyingly clashed and danced around the cramped balcony. The occasional sparks added color to the flashes of silver.

"Oh how the Wilds have cursed me! I must hurry, but I'm dying to watch this through!" Haydn was glued to the battle between two Beast Bloods.

Cameras must have been installed all around the balcony, because several of the rear monitors displayed different angles of their fight. And yet that wasn't enough for him. Haydn was keen on filming their battle with the small camcorder he had hidden in his pocket. He essentially had ringside seats to the ultimate match.

"You have to bear with it a while longer," Haydn said to Euphemia. "I will have you properly patched up once the authorities arrive. Yes, that's the face I want to see!"

"...Go to hell."

Haydn filmed Euphemia pinned to the floor by his rapier. She struggled to stand despite it, only for him to kick her in the side, knocking her back down.

The air hissed through her clenched teeth.

"Oh no! Your Beast Blood pet is in danger. He's being driven to the edge! Wow! He jumped onto the railing without looking behind him. Who knew they could do that. Does he have eyes on the back of his head? Is he an ape or an owl?"

Euphemia pretended to go limp on the ground and slowly inched away from Haydn on her stomach.

Unfortunately, Haydn was just as interested in her suffering as

the fight. He dug his foot into her side, keeping her pressed against the cold marble floor. The one hand he had on the rapier lodged in her calf didn't ease up either.

Bleeding out slowly from her calf, and still under the influence of drugs, Euphemia had no strength to force him away.

"GUH!"

Zelaide dropped on the ground to avoid Shank's blade. He was right next to the shield. In that instant, their eyes met. It was hard for her to know how he took her expression, but Zelaide smiled with just his lips and sprung to his feet.

"Don't worry," he mouthed.

Euphemia suddenly wanted to cry.

He's putting his life on the line to save me this very moment. Bound solely by a stupid contract. I won't let him die! Euphemia scraped together what little strength she could muster and quietly waited for her chance.

One of the chakrams tore through Zelaide's arm. Wearing body armor put Shank at an advantage over Zelaide.

To make matters worse, Shank seemed to have ample experience fighting Beast Bloods. It was difficult to tell a Beast Blood's age by their appearance, but Zelaide instinctively sensed that Shank had lived many more years than he had. Likely more than triple. He lived all this time hidden in human society, bringing death to both humans and Beast Bloods.

Zelaide, on the other hand, lived as a Muta Hunter and had significant experience battling the beasts for his age. But very little battle experience against Beast Bloods. The difference in experience was starting to show. Shank's expression remained unchanged despite Zelaide getting a few good hits in.

"Dance!"

Spinning blades flew at Zelaide again. He was starting to understand their trajectory now. He ducked and swept up with his knife, knocking the chakrams out of the air. They plummeted off the balcony with a whoosh. Shank's knife lashed out before he could breathe a sigh of relief.

Gimme a damn break!

Zelaide retreated to the balcony's edge and breathed.

What's that? From his current position, he spotted something shining on the wall. It appeared to be a lever that had been cleverly disguised to look like the rocks.

Does it go to the shields?

Shank unleashed his next attack before he could stop to think. Zelaide blocked his strikes, pretending he hadn't noticed the lever, and slowly retreated in that direction.

Just a little further. Just a little further.

Knowing Haydn's sickening hobbies, he probably built the shield to be controlled from inside and outside the control room, in case he wanted to trap someone in with the monitors.

Zelaide advanced a step. A trail of his blood stained the white marble floor. He took another step forward.

Shank swiveled in front of him, blocking his path. He had noticed Zelaide was controlling the direction of their fight. The lips on his deadpan face twisted. He was smiling. The lever was visible over his shoulder. One leap and he'd reach it.

Well, taking one direct hit shouldn't kill me.

Shank swung his knife up.

Zelaide lured him in close, dodged at the last second, and leapt. He didn't even think about attacking Shank.

Jumping with both feet paid off—Zelaide's hands latched onto the rock wall. He stomped on the u-shaped lever. The heaviness in the air instantly lifted. The invisible barrier at the entrance of the viewing room disappeared. Nothing was left to stop him. Now he could go to Euphemia's side.

"AGH!"

Severe pain pierced him.

A knife had pierced through Zelaide's thick leather boot and sank through the top of his right foot. Pain numbed his whole body. He couldn't withstand the sudden kick to his left leg and tumbled onto the ground. His knife flung out of his hand. He didn't have time to retrieve it. The next attack was coming. Zelaide dodged it by rolling into the control room.

"How?!"

Haydn was struck dumb by the black leather ball that suddenly rolled into his space.

As he rolled inside, Zelaide ran his eyes over the wall in front of him. Sure enough, there was a big lever just behind the wall. It was pulled down, in the off position. The shield could be controlled by a lever installed on the inner and outer wall.

Silver flashed through the air. Zelaide rolled to his feet and dodged away from Shank's knife. Blood squirt up around his

stabbed foot. He slammed into the wall and leaned in with his weight, shoving the lever up. Instantly, an invisible and heavy hum filled the room once again.

“AGGGGGGHHH!”

Shank’s knife hand skidded across the floor. Removed by the sheer power behind the Guardian-grade shield, the severed arm slid until it hit Haydn’s boot, leaving a long trail of blood behind it.

“...Urk,” Haydn croaked like a toad.

Euphemia noticed Haydn’s hand loosening its grip on the rapier and his foot easing up on her side as he balked. In that moment, adrenaline kicked in, the pain disappeared, and she grabbed hold of the handle and yanked out the blade skewering her flesh. And then—

“...?”

Haydn saw a delicate, long piece of red metal sticking out of his side. It took three whole seconds for him to realize that it was his own rapier sticking out of his side.

Though she had succeeded in thrusting the rapier into him, she had unfortunately missed his vitals. Haydn spun around and kicked the woman gripping the rapier in the face. Euphemia’s shoulders slammed into the hard marble, ripping the breath from her lungs, and the searing pain returned. Stifling her cries, she scrambled to her knees.

“You sow! You dare turn on me?!” Haydn tossed aside his camcorder and pulled a pistol from his jacket. Sweat glimmered on his face, but the gun barrel was aimed precisely at Euphemia’s forehead. “Die, wench. Atone with your death.”

“DIE!”

Zelaide raced to Euphemia. There was no way for him to save her except to become her shield.

Zelaide cried out in a voiceless roar.

NO! Anything but that! She’s my life. She’s everything to me... My very soul!

Haydn squeezed the trigger.

“GAAAAH!”

BANG!

A black spike zoomed through the air at breakneck speed, passing Zelaide, and striking the gun barrel. The diverted bullet shot into the rock ceiling.

Zelaide threw himself on Haydn, knocking him to the ground.

All of this happened in a blink of an eye.

Rocks showered them.

“...GUUERGH!”

Zelaide slammed his fist into Haydn’s face. Blood spurt from his nose like a water fountain. Haydn squealed like a Muta. Fear distorted his always smug face into something ugly.

“Bastard!” Zelaide straddled Haydn and shook him by his collar. “I should tear out your heart and feast on it...!”

The Beast Blood’s eyes gleamed despite the light. Madness flashed in them.

He brought his fist down on him over and over. Haydn quickly lost consciousness.

“Zel!”

A strangled cry instantly stopped his fists. Euphemia unsteadily rose.

“That’s enough. You’ve done enough. Any further and that thing will die without ever being fully punished. He will escape far too easily with a quick death... It’s okay now. I am right here... Calm down...please.”

“.....”

The Beast Blood’s arms fell limply to his side. Those teal eyes vacantly stared up at Euphemia. And then, like a lost child who had found his mother after days of wandering, light filled his eyes once again.

“...Yumi...”

“Thank you for coming to get me... I was waiting for you.”

His mate reached out. Though she wobbled on her feet, she opened her arms to him.

“Say, would you mind coming to me? My leg hurts too much to walk. Oh, but you’re hurt too...”

Zelaide clambered to his feet. His legs were in worse shape than hers, but he stopped feeling the pain. Staring into her eyes, he dragged one leg behind him as he crossed the endless distance between them.

He wasn’t just crossing the physical distance between them, but the figurative gap that kept them apart. The gap consisting of barriers such as class difference, cultural difference, and the difference between the worlds they lived in—those things that seemed impossible to bridge and overcome.

Who the hell cares 'bout that?

Zelaide jumped the last several feet to her.

“Zel! Are you okay? Oh no, look at all that blood—whoa!”

Euphemia’s vision was suddenly obstructed by something big—Zelaide’s warm, broad chest. He dropped to his knees and was hugging her. Or rather, clinging to her.

“I’m alive...you’re alive...Yumi...” He nuzzled his face against the nape of her neck. “I’m sorry... You must’ve been scared... Sorry. I’m so sorry!”

Sorry for letting you get hurt. Sorry for not protecting you. Sorry for makin’ you the mate of a beast like me. Sorry for not givin’ up on ya. Sorry for bein’ unable to let ya go.

“...Forgive me.” Zelaide apologized profusely into her chest.

“Zel...? What are you apologizing for?”

“For being an idiot,” bitterly answered a voice behind them.

Zelaide sprung up and hid Euphemia behind his back. Shank was standing there scoffing at them. He had flipped the lever and dropped the shield. He had tied a cord he ripped out of the wall around what was left of his arm to stop the bleeding. Blood dripped from the tied off ends.

“.....”

The Beast Blood males stared off. If stares could kill, theirs would have.

“Director Burhardt...”

It was the human girl who broke their silent battle. Shank’s gaze drifted to her. *Boring woman...*

This woman was only one of his subordinates at the temporary job he held as part of his current cover. She wasn’t particularly intelligent, and tried to get through life taking advantage of the privileges she was born with.

But that same woman didn’t lose her spirit even after being pinned to the floor by that sleazebag’s rapier. Her emerald eyes twinkled like the stars, making her just as beautiful and strong as any Beast Blood woman. Though she was more fragile than a flower petal, rather than be scared of the bloody arm that landed near her, she yanked the rapier from her leg and stabbed it into the back of the sleazebag during his moment of fear. How many women were capable of that? For that matter, how many men were?

And then there was the gun that was turned on her. Driven to insanity, the sleazebag tried to kill her. The young Beast Blood ran to shield her with his body.

Unforgiveable, Shank thought.

In that instant, even greater hatred for Zelaide exploded within him. That emotion threw a wrench into the man's ability to tackle every battle with a calm mind. Shank was in greater shock that he'd lost his composure over Zelaide trying to protect his mate than the fact he had lost an arm.

He was finished after that.

He threw the spike without even thinking about it.

Almost as if...

Almost as if I was trying to save the woman from death.

And that very woman was embracing the object of his hatred.

What a farce.

Why is this woman—

"My—"

"Don't look at her."

Zelaide sensed it right away. Baring his fangs, he glared at Shank.

"She is *my mate*."

"....."

"Don't look."

A ferocious growl rumbled deep in Zelaide's throat. The blood-covered silver wolf rose to his full height and showed his prowess despite his wounds. In order to obtain his mate and keep her from another male.

The two Beast Blood males faced off, ready to kill for a mate.

And then the entire room shook from a brain-rattling impact.

†Chapter 10: Dawn, Departure, and Reunion†

AN explosion shook the entire dome surrounding the artificial Wilds with a boom.

The real night sky broke through the fake daylight projected into the massive domed habitat. Early dawn had arrived in the outside world. It wasn't long before it would start to rain. Not a single star could be seen through the thick, gray clouds.

The whoosh of blades spinning was heard in the distance. A powerful searchlight attached to the bottom of a helicopter shined down from the hole in the sky.

Zelaide and Euphemia looked up just as the source of the pulsing roar appeared. The gaudy Renaissance TV logo stuck out like neon lights on the side of Haydn's company helicopter.

"Hey, howdy, hi! Good evening, people! Oh wait, it's almost dawn, huh? Then what a joyously good morning it is! Your favorite Arthur Molina is here!" exclaimed an effervescent voice that was so cheerful it was obviously faked enthusiasm.

Haydn owned Renaissance TV. Was this part of his escape plan? If it was, then Arthur Molina was the enemy.

"Oh my Muta! Would you look at that? There is a huge diorama under this great big circular dome! Can you viewers at home see it with the searchlight? What beauty!" Arthur narrated what he saw for their news program.

"Oh, wow! There are people inside. Can you zoom in with the cameras? Why, isn't that our esteemed CEO collapsed on the ground? He seems to be face down on the marble balcony with a bloody nose. Get the kids out of the room! We are about to show you an ocean of blood! It's not even this bloody in the movies. Are the people inside all right? What in the twelve colonies happened here?!"

"Son of a Bijour..." Zelaide cursed.

Zelaide hid Euphemia behind him and turned toward the enemy he had to fight on the ground first.

"Shit!"

Shank was gone.

The stealthy Beast Blood had escaped while they were preoccupied by the blast that took out the top of the dome.

A trail of fresh blood disappeared off the side of the balcony, and the man who had been ready to kill Zelaide had vanished entirely from the playing field.

"Where is he...?" Euphemia followed Zelaide's gaze around the dome. Stepping forward sent searing pain surging through her.

Seeing her cringe, Zelaide removed his jacket and undershirt.

"Hey, Zel! Don't strip. We're being filmed live."

"Don't care. You aren't losing a ton of blood, but the cut is deep. Gonna wrap it tight with this for the time bein'."

Zelaide wrapped his undershirt around Euphemia's calf and gingerly adjusted her disheveled clothing. Her gorgeous golden hair and autumn dress were stained with blood, sweat, and tears. Even so, his mate mesmerized him with her overwhelming beauty.

"...Thanks."

"It looks bad... Can you stand?"

Zelaide checked over her injuries while feeling like his heart was being crushed in the process. She hadn't lost a lot of blood, but the rapier tip had pierced through her leg. Most people would've fainted from the shock it caused. Anger reignited, Zelaide shot a killer glare at Haydn crumpled on the ground.

I can still rip his rotten heart out...

"He's not worth it, Zel! I'm alive. He just cut off a little excess fat. If it had gone through bone, I would be in agony, but I've got plenty of fat to get rid of. So let's not kill someone over it, okay?" Euphemia tried persuading the Beast Blood who looked like he was ready to pounce.

Zelaide was unconvinced by her reasoning. But, if nothing else, he decided not to deal the killing blow. He instead turned back to Euphemia, brought his face extra close to hers, and flashed a lopsided smile.

"Fine... I'll do it your way."

"You look worse off than me, Zel..." Euphemia said, eyeing the knife still sticking out of his boot. He was injured saving her. "I'm so sorry," she muttered, heartbroken.

"Don't apologize..."

Zelaide hugged Euphemia, using his back to shield their faces from the cameras. Meanwhile, the helicopter slowly descended into

the dome until it was level with the balcony. They kissed as the spinning blades created a harsh gust behind them. Stimulated by the rotor's vibrations, they passionately embraced the person they thought they had come close to losing forever. The blinding searchlight obscured their entangled silhouettes.

Those perverted cameramen could go right ahead and film them. In this moment, they were just happy to be alive and together.

The helicopter descended until it landed in an open area crafted to look like the Wilds. The obnoxious whooshing of the blades slowed until it eventually ceased altogether. Voices could be heard from below the balcony.

"Zel..." Frightened of what awaited them, Euphemia snuggled into him. She had stayed strong through everything, but she was still scared of the unknown even though she hadn't done anything wrong.

"It'll be okay. Keep your face hidden best ya can. I'll deal with Molina. Lay low until then."

"Okay... You aren't going to leave me again, are you?"

"I'm not goin' anywhere. Not gonna let you go."

Euphemia buried her face in his muscular chest and took her first real relaxed breath of the day. Being together with Zelaide gave her peace of mind. She entrusted herself to him for the next battle they had to face. Zelaide gently laid her on the one recliner in the back of the control room that had survived the fight.

He pulled his leather jacket on over his bare chest and stood in the entrance to the control room, acting as the final line of defense. The reinforcements that came by helicopter likely knew the dome's layout. It wouldn't take long before they came to apprehend Zelaide and Euphemia. Haydn was still unconscious, but he was absolutely going to condemn them as soon as he came to.

With his foot mangled, Zelaide couldn't run away carrying Euphemia. Beast Bloods were not immortal.

Zelaide's mind raced.

I don't care what happens to me. I was born into hatred. I'll gladly sit in for my execution if that's what it takes to protect Euphemia.

Euphemia not only hadn't committed any crimes, she was the victim here.

While Zelaide stood ready to face what was coming, Arthur Molina went inside the artificial mountain and exited on top of the

balcony. A secret entrance at the base of the mountain had an elevator that they took up.

“In here! This is the place! Guns up!”

Several men were shouting orders. Tension tightened Euphemia and Zelaide’s sweaty faces. Automatic doors slid open on both sides of the room and four armed Guardians stepped forward with their guns trained on Zelaide who had returned to stand protectively in front of Euphemia.

“Holy Muta! Those are some gnarly wounds. Are you all right? Men, attend to their injuries, pronto!” Arthur commanded, saying something entirely unexpected.

The camera crew and rescue workers rushed into the control room from the opposite elevator, carrying camera and medical equipment. Haydn writhed on the floor when he heard them.

“Ugghh...nnghh,” he moaned.

“Oh, President Haydn, you’ve come to! You have my condolences for what you went through this time.” Arthur swung his hand forward, signaling the Guardians with him to run over and help Haydn up.

“Ghh...it...him...he...did it...criminal...” Haydn’s words came out choppy as he choked on the blood seeping from his nose and mouth. He was trying to tell them to apprehend Zelaide.

Arthur coldly looked down at him. “Poor, poor President Haydn. You were beaten up pretty bad. You can relax now. We will see to your injuries—before seeing you locked up for your crimes.”

“WHAT...?!” Haydn’s swollen eyes bulged.

“Someone hacked into my IHT on the flight over after you asked me to come.”

“...So?”

“The message title was intriguing, so I opened it. Lo and behold, I was treated to an unbelievable live video feed.”

“Wha...?!”

“The video showed an illegal Night Bloom field, trucks full of refined Nightz, and Bijours being kept as pets. Possession of either is explicitly banned by colony law. I also got to watch as you stabbed a rapier into the young lady over there, pointed a gun at her, and your long tirade about how you planned to frame the Beast Blood who came to rescue her...”

Molina walked over to the balcony railing and looked up at the camera facing the control room. It was built on a pivot giving it a

360 degree view of the dome. “Looks like that’s the camera responsible right there.”

“I-Impossible. That’s...my—”

“Rest assured, your crappy performance was also caught on tape. But it seems someone tampered with the camera settings. The entire live recording was sent to me and the station, not your cloud drive,” Arthur explained, excitement in his voice. “You deceived us for a long time, but thanks to that, I now have the scoop of a lifetime. You have my thanks.”

“I-Impossible...” Haydn’s jaw dropped to his chest. Despair weighed heavily on his shoulders.

“I am genuinely amazed you were able to perpetrate this many crimes without arousing suspicion.” Arthur shook his head. “Then again, who would survive openly suspecting someone as big and entrenched as you? What makes it even worse, or better for my scoop, is that you committed all these crimes to satisfy your personal interests rather than for money or fame. My schedule just got very busy. I look forward to going on the air with this. Now then...”

Arthur stood up and turned toward the scowling Beast Blood and the woman clutched preciously to his chest.

“This is my second encounter with you two. As I thought, you were more than just small time players in the film of life. Oh dear, why do these things sound so clichéd when I say them? Oh well. Thanks to you, I got my hands on the greatest scoop since Gothic City was built. But before I get to that, we need to patch you up.”

The popular news anchor beamed at the bloody couple.

†††

ZELAIDE allowed the medics to clean Euphemia’s wounds, but he wrapped her bandages. He refused to let them do much for his own injuries, beyond cleaning him up to stop his blood from dirtying Euphemia’s hair. Nothing else mattered as long as she was safe. Most of his concentration was focused on searching for Shank, but his presence was long gone. Knowing him, he must have escaped during the commotion of the dome being blown open and the helicopter landing.

But now not even his sworn enemy mattered.

“Yumi...” Zelaide muttered in a thin voice.

There hadn't been a moment of rest for her since her abduction. Dark circles had formed under her eyes and her long eyelashes stuck together. Some of the roundness had gone out of her pale cheeks.

But despite it all, she was still warm.

Zelaide rubbed her soft cheek with the back of his finger.

Ooh, Yumi...how I've missed you!

Water droplets plopped onto his cheek.

Raindrops fell from the plastered darkness. Something landed quietly on Zelaide's back when he bent forward to prevent Euphemia from getting wet. It tugged at his long hair. He raised his face and saw Topsy climb up his shoulder. A piece of paper had been strapped to his talon.

Topsy wriggled as Zelaide untied the paper. Inside a single sentence was roughly scribbled in blood.

“You owe me big. –V.”

Zelaide buried his face in the hair of his beloved.

†††

“**MAN**, oh, man was I surprised when that video showed up on my IHT,” Arthur said in a surprisingly quiet voice as he looked into the back of the helicopter.

Heavy rain pelted the round metal frame. The transport helicopter flew through the pre-dawn downpour.

“Someone set up that camera to capture the nitty-gritty details of the night, right?” Arthur guessed. “It wasn't you, was it? Only someone who could enter that estate without being suspected and knew the inner workings of the security system could have pulled it off.”

Holding Euphemia on his lap, Zelaide stared at the scenery passing below them without answering Arthur. He was content to rest with his mate and didn't feel like waking her by chatting with the noisy anchorman.

The glowing lights of Romanesque City gradually faded beyond the veil of rain. Only the streetlights illuminating the freeway floated like globes in the darkness ahead, decorating the night like a pearl necklace.

How would they be treated once they arrived in Gothic City? There wasn't much time to think up a plan. The helicopter would bring them back in half the time it took to get there by car.

"...And so I just have no idea who the sender could be," Arthur continued talking, uncaring that Zelaide wasn't listening. Maybe he just liked the sound of his own voice or was trying to see if he could find the answer in Zelaide's reaction. "Haydn's security team didn't have the time or mentality to do it. Not to mention they were all lying on the ground half-dead near the greenhouse when I went to look. No way they sent the dome footage... Haydn sent the rest of his staff on vacation for a few days too. And he's not the kind of man to expose his own evil deeds..."

Arthur searched Zelaide's face even though it was turned toward the window.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to know who sent it, would you? It wasn't you, right?"

"....."

Silence answered Arthur's barrage of questions. Zelaide had a general idea of who the sender might be and honestly didn't care. Meanwhile, Arthur shook his head and shrugged, unable to give up on the extra detail that could really spice up his scoop.

"Well...I don't know who is responsible, but I owe them my thanks. That video exposed our president's villainy and perversion. Haydn threw some acting of his own into the mix, which I'm sure he planned to edit before sending it off to us."

Zelaide's gaze moved from the window to Euphemia. She stirred on his chest. Arthur gave up trying to get information out of him and cracked a smile.

"Looks like she means a lot to you."

Zelaide pulled Euphemia even closer and buried his face in her hair. His nose tickled a moan out of her. He lifted his face.

"Hmm?" Euphemia's eyes flicked open. She relaxed as soon as she saw who she was with and a sleepy smile spread on her dry, cracked lips. "...Zel?"

"I'm here. How do you feel?"

"Decent... Where are we?"

"In the sky. On a heli headed for Gothic City. Be there soon."

"Okay... I'm thirsty." Euphemia rubbed her chapped lips.

"One sec."

Zelaide popped open the bottle in the cup holder, poured it

into his mouth, and shared it with Euphemia through a kiss. She drank from his lips like a kitten. Arthur, the Guardians, and the medics all looked away from the couple as they repeated that embarrassing display.

"Thank you." Euphemia wiped her mouth.

"How's your leg?" he asked, rubbing her back.

"It's been better. How are you doing?"

"Well enough. Stopped bleedin'."

"....."

I feel like I'm forgetting something important... Euphemia looked around her for the first time since waking up. She knew she was in a helicopter, but wasn't in a position to see anything other than Zelaide for the first few minutes.

"Mr. Molina...?" she murmured.

"You finally noticed I'm here? You two were so absorbed in your own little world I wasn't sure where to look."

"...I'm sorry."

Blushing, Euphemia looked down and realized she was still sitting on Zelaide's lap. She quickly slid off onto the empty seat beside him. Her leg throbbed, but she'd rather put up with the pain than the embarrassment. Zelaide clearly looked disappointed when she glanced back at him. He allowed her to leave his lap, but had no intention of releasing her as his arm remained securely wrapped around her shoulders.

A-Are Beast Bloods all right with public displays of affection? He's going to give them the wrong idea... Though I prefer it that way.

"E-Excuse me!" In any case, she wanted to change the topic. There were a lot of things she needed to confirm now that her brain was working again. "Can you tell me what happened to Mister Haydn?"

"Oh, him? He was transported to Romanesque's city-run hospital for the time being. He's under heavy security and will be escorted to Gothic City tomorrow. Your older sister made that call. The hot line between the two mayors has got to be getting literally heated by now."

"Then Erica already knows what happened?" Euphemia asked somberly.

"I told her as much as I learned. I also sent her that video. Your boyfriend there won't tell me anything further." Arthur glanced over at Zelaide who was still incorrigibly holding onto

Euphemia and glowering at the other man. The famous anchorman could only smile dryly in return.

"I see. Oh yeah! What happened to Ronaldo? I haven't seen him since we both passed out at the restaurant. Our drinks were spiked..."

"I just received word from the team that arrived after mine saying they found a young man confined to the compound's basement with a number of Muta held in cages. He's on his way to the hospital now. Report said he was drugged out of his mind, but it's nothing he can't recover from."

"I hope he recovers soon..." Euphemia said, worried for her coworker. "He tried to protect me."

"The first SOS alert was sent by his IHT. Don't forget to thank him later. We were able to locate you guys sooner because of it. And we also discovered a Nightz refinery in the same basement. Our team also found trucks full of pure Nightz and several fields of Night Blooms in the dome's artificial Wilds. It's not the largest Nightz facility we've uncovered, but running it on a smaller scale has allowed him to steadily pump it out without being suspected. My reporter instincts tell me he has similar properties in every city on the planet... May the twelve colonies have mercy on us all for letting him deceive us for so long," Arthur grumbled bitterly.

"Oh no!" Euphemia cried, startling everyone in the helicopter. "What about my gerbils?!"

"What gerbils?" Arthur cocked his head.

"My gerbils! My experiment finally succeeded, but I left the gerbils at the experimental farm!" she groaned, clasping her hands over her mouth.

"Hahaha!" Arthur belted out his first genuine laugh of the night. "You're more worried about some lab rats than yourself after all you've been through? You're a funny one. Well, we're landing soon, so let's handle the small details once you settle back in. Your gerbils aren't going anywhere. Look out the window. You can see Forzarin Gate's imposing silhouette." He pointed out the windshield.

The night sky was faintly illuminated by the coming dawn.

Beyond that, they could see Gothic City's spires as the nighttime lights started to shut off. The floating fortress city stood beautifully above the darkness.

The rain stopped as if its droplets were sucked back up into the

sky. Bands of light shined down through the clouds. Dawn had arrived.

“Zel...”

“Yeah, I’m looking.” Zelaide nodded. But he wasn’t looking outside the window.

“Isn’t it pretty?”

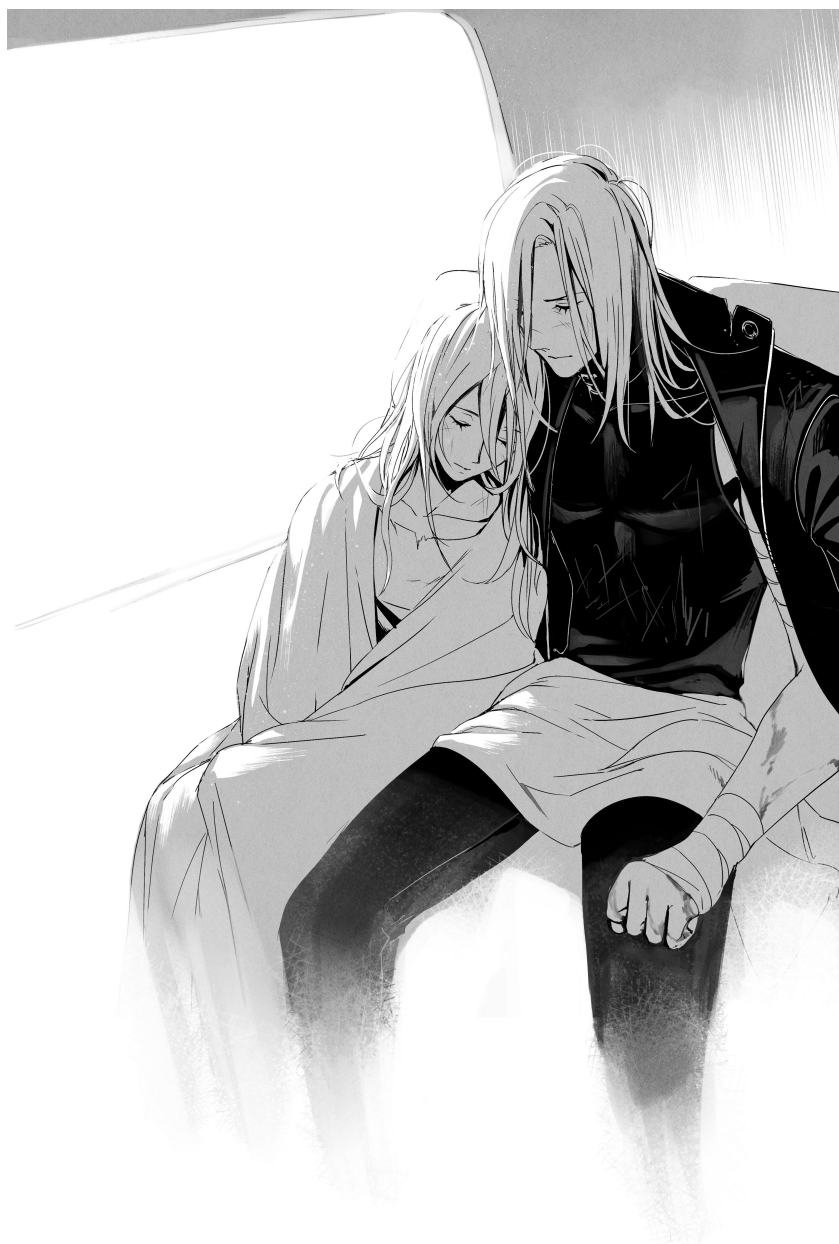
“Very pretty.”

Light shined through the window onto her face. The light had a golden hue that gradually dyed the world yellow.

Daybreak.

A new day, a fresh start.

Safety assured, Euphemia rested her head on Zelaide’s shoulder and he leaned his head on hers. Bathed in the morning light, they finally closed their eyes together.



IS this a dream? It must be.

Wrapped in clean sheets, Euphemia slept with a smile on her face. Zelaide felt at peace for the first time in his life.

Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine the day would come when he could look upon his mate and be at peace. Both the intense hunger and insatiable thirst had subsided, leaving behind only love and affection, which overflowed like an endless fountain. For the first time, he realized he could feel immense satisfaction just by watching his mate sleep comfortably.

It was a new revelation.

This is more than I deserve. I'm more than satisfied with this...

Tension no longer hardened her white cheeks and curved jawline. Fear would no longer fill the emerald eyes that captivated him so. There was nothing left in the world to threaten her.

A bright future lies ahead of her. That's why...why I...

The Beast Blood lay beside his mate and closed his eyes. A single teardrop ran down his cheek.

"...Mm?" Euphemia's eyelids fluttered open. A white ceiling came into view. Dull light filled the room. Expensive-looking blue curtains blocked the intense sunrays, while allowing in the errant autumn breeze.

Smells like fall. The air smells crisp and cold with a hint of dried grass, sour apples, and...the man I love...

"...Weird?"

Euphemia's entire body ached. Not only did it hurt, but felt like gravity was crushing down on her.

An IV was hooked to her wrist and a blood pressure cuff was wrapped around her bare upper arm. Numerous tubes and medical devices were attached to her skin. It felt like she was tied to the bed. So why did she wake up in such an idyllic mood?

Strange. Staying perfectly still, since moving caused the tubes to tug on her skin, she frowned. *Oh yeah, I was drugged, kidnapped, forced to watch those deranged videos, and then injected with Nightz... Then Zelaide saved me. There was so much blood...and screaming.*

Tears streaked her cheeks in a silent stream.

She had been betrayed by the boss she had trusted. His gentle

smile and kindness was all an act.

But this fragrance is real.

She managed to turn her neck to the side. A handsome face slept on the edge of the soft pillow next to her.

Oh my stars! Zel! Zel's asleep! Next to me!

The Beast Blood had fallen asleep in a white chair with his upper body leaning on her bed. His silver hair cascaded over the pillow and around his face. Bathed in the filtered sunlight, he looked like a mystical wolf from the old world.

This was the first time she had seen him asleep.

How can he be this beautiful?

Her eyes took in every detail of his face from the straight-edged nose, chiseled cheeks ending in a masculine jawline, and the silver eyelashes she never realized were twice the length of her own. Those eyelashes were currently pressed together in sleep, making him appear younger than usual. Euphemia was captivated by how the man who was always on high alert could sleep so defenselessly in her presence.

How much time has gone by since I blacked out?

A single glance around the room told her she was in a hospital.

She ached and felt like a Muta was lying on top of her, but that was due to her injuries and fatigue, not a new symptom that required a doctor's immediate services.

Euphemia scowled as she tried to chase away the horrible images burnt into her mind.

But with Zel by my side, I can overcome anything. After all, he and I are...

Pure bliss wrapped her up like a blanket with the one good memory she had of the past few days.

"Zel... I love you!"

The Beast Blood's eyes snapped open. Those clear, teal gems glistened in the soft sunlight.

"...Yumi." He slowly sat up.

"Zel."

They shared a long, lingering gaze. Zelaide smiled first, softening his whole face and the hardness that marked his usual lack of expression. Euphemia was so taken by the gentleness, pink stained her cheeks.

He's showing me so many sides of himself that I've never seen before.

“Yumi...”

Their lips came together and touched lightly, separated, then came together again. Bliss filled them both.

“...How long was I asleep for?” she asked when Zelaide pulled away to brush a strand of hair behind her ear.

“A whole day.”

“...That long?”

“Yeah.”

“What hospital is this?”

“One in City Hall.”

“Oh...I see.”

I've fallen back into my sister's hands. Euphemia became pensive. Worry furrowed Zelaide's brow.

“Does it...hurt?” he asked.

“A bit...yeah.”

Painkillers seemed to be keeping the worst of the pain at bay. She felt slightly feverish. But it didn't bother her. She had nothing to fear as long as they were together.

“How are you doing, Zel? You looked so much worse off than me.”

“I'm fine. Murakami patched me up.”

“Murakami? You mean President Murakami?!”

“The one and only,” Zelaide laughed, amused by her surprise.

Not even the genius scientist had guessed that he was up against a Beast Blood when he went after Burhardt.

Murakami and his team fought for their lives, a battle they lost in the end when Burhardt broke both his legs and nearly killed the Guardians with him. That did nothing to dampen the eccentric scientist's spirits though. He enthusiastically welcomed Zelaide and Euphemia at City Hall's hospital, and since Zelaide refused to let anyone treat him or to let go of Euphemia, Murakami saw to his wounds from his new wheelchair.

Ever since the Bijour incident, the two men had developed an unexpected bond.

“I never expected President Murakami to help,” Euphemia said, her opinion of Murakami still as low as ever.

“It's a bit hard to walk with the metal splint he used to keep my foot level.” Zelaide glanced down at his foot and shook his head. “I'll make do though.”

“Where's Ronaldo?”

"Floor below this. Haven't seen him myself."

For a frivolous guy who easily went with the flow, Ronaldo did what needed to be done when push came to shove. He recovered faster than Euphemia and became an important eye witness in Haydn's case.

"I caused so many people to get hurt..." Euphemia murmured weakly.

"...It's not your fault. Focus on recovery over worry."

"I will... I'm going back to work as soon as I get better," she declared, the strength returning to her voice again.

"Back to those gerbils?"

"Back to my gerbils."

"That's just like ya. Take it easy for the time bein'."

"...Don't wanna."

Wind blew in through the open window and tousled the Beast Blood's hair. Comfortable silence settled over them.

"...I'm sorry," he said, breaking the quiet.

"What for?"

"I said I'd protect you and look how you ended up."

"Alive is how I ended up. You fought for me."

"Little good that did. You were kidnapped, hurt, and nearly killed. I didn't even avenge Manuela... If he hadn't thrown that spike, you may have died. I didn't do nothin' in the end."

"Zel...that's not true. From the beginning, you have protected me with everything you have," Euphemia reassured, holding his hands in hers.

"I'm still just a punk kid," he lamented. "Everybody says so. But I never understood. I'm just like a kid who still has a lot to learn... I was overreachin', thinking I could protect ya."

"I love you the way you are, Zel. I don't care what others say. We never stop growing as people." Euphemia reached out with the arm hooked to the IV. She stroked his cheek. He didn't reject her touch.

"....."

"Say...can I ask you something?" she asked.

"...Yeah. What is it?"

"Did you mean what you said?"

"Said when?" He cocked his head.

"You know...what you said just before Burhardt disappeared..."

Euphemia wouldn't forget that moment for the rest of her life.

"She is my mate."

The sound of his voice, his expression, and warmth in that moment were burned into her mind, overriding the trauma she had gone through.

Even the way Shank's face twisted in response was vividly imprinted on her.

"....."

"Did you mean it?"

"I didn't say anythin'—"

"You did too! Ow...!" Euphemia groaned from the pain of sitting up to argue the point. Zelaide put his arm around her shoulder and eased her back down.

"Don't make me repeat myself! Take it easy!" he instructed gruffly.

"I will if you tell me. Were you telling the truth? Have I become your mate?"

Zelaide stared sadly down at Euphemia. He combed his fingers through her messy hair. She was hot to the touch—a sign she still had a fever. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "You have."

"...I have...?" she gaped.

"Yeah. You're my one and only mate."

"....."

"And you didn't become it. I just realized you were it. Sucks for you."

"It does not suck—"

Zelaide's big hand gently sealed her objection. "What is it people say at a time like this? Oh yeah...that's it..."

"...Zel?"

"Isn't there a human word for this feeling?" A grin suddenly broke through Zelaide's tough exterior. "I love ya."

"...!"

"...I love ya so much," he expressed with a lisp. His tongue wasn't used to using that word.

Euphemia was so happy, she felt like she had gone to heaven. It was too perfect, she wondered if she had died.

It's just five words, but they are the most beautiful thing I have ever heard...

Tears formed in her eyes.

"Yumi? Why're you cryin'? Don't cry...please?" Zelaide

panicked.

“You...really...mean it?”

Does he understand the reason for these tears? Euphemia looked at him with her eyes opened wide as they could go. She wanted to see all of him.

“I really mean it, Yumi... I love ya. So much it drives me crazy...”

“...Yeah...I understand the feeling... I love you too.”

“You love me?” Zelaide repeated back as if it were the last thing he expected her to say. It didn’t matter that she had said it before when he didn’t understand what it meant.

“I do. I’m glad I’m you’re mate. I thought I had to give up on these feelings a long time ago because I was just a job to you...”

“I didn’t know... But that’s exactly why I...I must...”

“Must what? Mmph!”

Zelaide stole her pursed lips. “You’re too cute, Yumi... Way too cute.”

“Scuse me?”

Today Euphemia discovered so many different surprising sides of him. Feeling more satisfaction than she knew possible, she sighed between their kisses.

“Yumi... I’m sorry.”

“Hm? What for?”

Zelaide’s hot breath tickled her skin. She stared back at him, unsure of why he was apologizing this time. He averted his gaze from those bright emeralds.

I can’t allow myself to be with you the way I am now... I’ll become stronger—strong enough I can be proud to call myself your mate. If I don’t, I won’t be able to take him down. I doubt he’s comin’ back to this city, but the maddening look he gave Euphemia said it all... Zelaide gnawed the side of his cheek.

Humans couldn’t even begin to understand the hatred a Beast Blood felt toward another male who showed a deep interest in their mate. Bad luck seemed to go hand in hand with being a Beast Blood.

But, Yumi, while you’re my mate, the same lifelong attachment doesn’t apply to a human like you. Don’t get tied down by a Beast Blood. I’m crazy ’bout you, but I know I’m not worthy of you yet. That’s why...

Zelaide closed his eyes.

I'm leavin'. I'm settin' you free.

"...Zel? Are you hurting?"

"Yeah, I am. Why don't we both get some more sleep? I'll stick around," he whispered, rubbing her cheek with his coarse finger.

Euphemia's eyelids slowly lowered to the comfortable beat of his hand patting her on the shoulder.

"Stay with me, Zel."

"I'm right here, holding your hand."

"...I wanna eat...when I wake up. I want another chance to... try your porridge," she mumbled.

"Sure thing. I'll make anything you want."

"Thanks...I'm so...happy...Zel..."

Her eyes fluttered opened and closed several times before she fell asleep. She slept with a smile on her face, hugging his big hand to her chest.

Zelaide stayed quietly by her side until he confirmed she was in a deep sleep and gently pulled his hand out of hers. A chill instantly filled his palm and heart.

"Goodbye, Yumi. I'll love ya till the day I die," Zelaide whispered to his beloved's peacefully sleeping face.

He kissed her feverish lips three times, wishing those kisses would last forever.



A month passed since Zelaide disappeared without a trace.

Gothic City was steadily recovering from its unprecedented turmoil. Haydn was arrested for being the mastermind behind the production and distribution of Nightz, but it would take a long time for the authorities to track down the full extent of his criminal behavior. He was being treated in an undisclosed hospital under heavy security to prevent him from destroying evidence, running away, or committing suicide.

Haydn's evil influence also extended to the police, where he had intimate connections with the commanding officers. Erica's first action was to expose and purge the city's police of corrupt officials. Wei Lin-jie played a key role in taking them down from the inside.

After Haydn's arrest, the rest of the corrupt officials fell like dominos.

People who are bought with money are quick to flee once the money dries up.

As one of Gothic City's leading political figures with a police background, Ingalls fully backed the evidence Wei brought against the corrupt officers.

Thanks to his excellent detective work, Wei had become the man of the hour at the station.

"So I'm thinking of taking the next Guardian test. I was given a letter of recommendation, after all," Wei boasted, sitting across from Euphemia at one of City Hall's sidewalk cafes.

Euphemia eyed him suspiciously. "Why? Not happy with being a cop?"

"I like being a cop. It's a good job. But Guardians are really cool. They're the ones who were sent out first to take down Haydn. Cops didn't get there till after everything was over."

"I heard the Guardians who got there first were taken out by Shank and had to retire from the force because of their life-threatening injuries," Euphemia stated dryly.

"They're still awesome. The Beast Bloods successfully raided the villa because the Guardians destroyed the sensors and defense system first," Wei exclaimed, excited just thinking about it.

"Who told you that?" Euphemia asked pointedly. She rarely listened to what other people had to say, but was annoyingly sharp when it came to picking up on unsaid things.

Wei hated his loose tongue. "Urk... What makes you think I was told that?"

"Who was it?" Euphemia pressured.

"...He did. Silvergray," Wei revealed, losing out to her evil eye. He never could win against her since their university days.

There was a one second pause before she threw out another question. "I see... When did you see him?"

"Er, well...just before he left town... He showed up at my door..."

"Heh. Did he say where he was going?"

Wei felt like he was being interrogated, the reverse of his usual role.

"...Nope. Just that he was leaving and that he wants to get stronger."

"....."

What a lovable fool you are, Zel. You don't need to get any

stronger. Euphemia hung her head, her prior fervor disappearing as if it never existed.

“...Hey, Mia? Don’t you think he really loves you a lot?”

“...I once thought so. Now I’m not so sure,” she admitted, the loneliness she had been struggling with turning into doubt.

“Don’t say that. I’ll feel bad too.”

“Why would you feel bad?” She looked up at him.

“Because he lowered his head to me and asked me to protect you, even though that request sounded like it was killing him on the inside... I could tell he wanted to be the one to be here with you.”

“...Then he should have stayed. He’s the worst kind of guy, leaving without a word like that.”

It was clear she was pretending to be angry in order to stay strong. But her voice gave away her hurt.

Droplets fell on the table.

“He has no idea how sad he’s made me...”

The loss she felt when she woke up and learned he was gone for good had only grown worse with the passage of time and slowly ate away at her heart.

“...He’ll come back once he’s stronger. Don’t cry, Mia.”

“Don’t say something he’d say.”

“I say what I mean.”

“I hate him.”

“Don’t say that. He might die for real if he overheard you.”

“Then he shoulda never left!” Tears cascaded down her cheeks.

“Sometimes a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. Yup.”

“Don’t give me an old world slogan!” Euphemia snapped at the innocent Wei between her sniffles.

“Ugh... Okay, how about sometimes a woman’s just gotta go after her man?”

“Hell yeah! Women don’t just wait around for their man to come back! Once work settles down, I’m going to hunt him down!”

Good grief. She’ll definitely do it. Silvergray, I understand why you left, but you’d better hurry back soon... Wei thought as he comforted Euphemia in her mate’s stead.

†††

“GOOD afternoon. How’s the leg?”

“Why, if it isn’t the stunning and beautiful mayor! I’m honored you went out of your way to visit me in this stuffy place!” Murakami stood from his souped-up wheelchair.

What he referred to as a stuffy place was actually Biotechnology’s president office. In the center of the room was a large stately desk covered in a plausible amount of paperwork, but the shelves behind him were a mess. Miscellaneous items that looked an awful lot like junk bulged from the shelves. There was even a model of an old world sailing boat, an ape’s skull, and a remarkable glazed rice bowl. The variety of objects in the room revealed the owner’s various interests.

“Oh, you can walk already?” Erica asked.

“Yes. I told everyone else that it will be another month before I can walk again, so that I can continue to take things easy. All this time off has given me the wonderful idea to make a service robot next. As you know, I also have a PhD in engineering and in robotics.” Murakami waved a hand toward his wall of diplomas.

“You don’t stop even after being injured, do you? Though the same applies to my sister,” Erica said with a sigh.

“Indeed. She is a hard worker.”

“Is her research even useful?”

“Your cruelty toward family never ceases to amaze me. Her research is only a step away from being put into practice.”

“That’s something at least... I suppose Mia has grown up. I was worried because she had become a blubbering mess for a time, but she seems to be plugging away at her work now. She gets her resilience from her mother. They are strongest in the face of adversity.”

“Heh... Do you think that resilience will make her dedicate the rest of her life to rodents?” Murakami asked. It was hard to tell if that was a joke or not.

“Who knows? But I think she has dedicated her life to someone other than the rodents already.”

“Oh, did she now? How nice it is to be young and in love.” Murakami grinned.

“I never expected that Beast Blood to care so much for Euphemia. What do they call it? Mates?”

“That’s their way of defining it, yes. Don’t you think the concept of devoting your whole life to one person is splendid? Perhaps they have achieved some part of the human ideal.” A

twinkle lit his eyes.

“Still, I feel bad for Euphemia as things are. I have been searching for him all this time with no luck...” Erica confessed.

“If she is his mate...he will definitely return. Mates, huh? Sure is nice to have a mate. By the way, I heard you rejected Mr. Ingalls’s proposal?” Murakami exclaimed, his beady eyes rounding with delight.

“Word travels fast... Yes, I did.”

“He’s the leading man in uncovering Haydn’s crimes. He’s also widowed and ranks decently high with his masculine good looks. The pot only gets sweeter with the fact that he’s fairly wealthy, a landowner, has social status, and a good name. Didn’t it occur to you that partnering with him would only bring you further in life?” Murakami inquired, resting his chin on his hands.

“That inquiry coming from the same man who just went on about how nice it would be to have a mate? Do you honestly believe me the type to marry for advancement?” she huffed.

“...Even I get jealous sometimes,” he muttered, being unusually vague for once.

“What is there for you to be jealous of?”

“Yeah, I think obliviousness is a genetic trait you sisters share...” Murakami murmured, sullen. The IHT on his table rang before more could be said. “Hello, it’s me. What? Yes. Come again? That’s not good... Okay. Does she have a fever? I’ll hand the phone over to her now. Here, Erica.”

“Thank you.” Erica turned the IHT toward her.

The caller informed her that Euphemia had fainted in her lab .

†††

“**IT’S** been a while.” Palmina sat down and crossed her legs, giving the young woman dressed in plain clothes a snide look. Her autumn-colored suit stood out against the white couch.

“It has been a while, hasn’t it?”

“I heard you were sick.”

“Yes, I felt nauseous for a long time. I’m okay now though,” Euphemia answered her honestly. “How did you know?”

“I hated you so much for a time that I was keeping tabs on you. I have friends who work for Biotech... Did you know that

while you were confined to City Hall I was sending slanderous emails about you and the Mayor to everyone I knew? To the mayor herself as well,” Palmina confessed, her painted lips curved in a pert smile.

“What kind of slander?” Euphemia asked calmly.

“Oh stuff like she shouldn’t be wasting taxpayer dollars to protect her sister and that she should free Zelaide from his contract. I realized my actions were cowardly, but I felt like I would be crushed by my hatred if I did nothing. It got me nowhere in the end anyway.”

“I see...” Euphemia recalled Erica mentioning something about those emails at one point.

“You’re the reason why Zelaide left this city.”

Euphemia answered her accusation with silence.

“The last email he sent me is dated the day before he left. It contained just two lines: ‘I’m going to get stronger for my mate’ and ‘I want to end our contract.’ I haven’t been able to get in touch with him since.”

All of Euphemia’s emails had also bounced back saying receiver not found. Zelaide had severed everyone’s ability to contact him.

Another message about him wanting to get stronger?

Over the past month, Euphemia had grown to hate the word.

“Looks like you are his mate,” Palmina tossed out with a layer of disgust.

“Yes, I am,” Euphemia said definitively. That was the only crutch she had left to stand on.

“I did enough research to understand how intense a Beast Blood’s love and fixation is for their mate. They are a million times more loyal to their mate than humans are... So I hate you. Even now.”

Euphemia silently held her glare.

“He might have become my man if you hadn’t appeared from the sidelines.”

“I doubt it,” Euphemia shot back.

Disgust twisted Palmina’s perfect smile into something ugly. “...Says you.”

“Sorry, but I know how loyal and honest he is.”

“I do too,” Palmina snipped. “I’ve known him decades longer than you. Loath as I am to admit it, he never once saw me as a

woman. I just thought he was too young to realize he could have me, but that's a Beast Blood for you. They feel nothing for women who aren't their mates, much less for women they only work with. I know that. I still hate your guts. How dare a naïve, spoiled brat like you steal my man from me like that? I know I'm being immature. But logic tends to lose out to emotions."

"It certainly does... I think I would have felt the same way in your shoes," Euphemia agreed.

"Good."

"But you didn't just come here to whine about your feelings, did you?"

"Right you are. I came to tell you that I am getting out of this line of work."

"You're retiring from being an agent?"

"Yes. Zelaide has already earned me a nice living. I was an agent for several other Beast Bloods, but I terminated our contracts. I've wanted to see more of this planet since I arrived here and fortunately for me, a wealthy lady just so happened to be looking for a secretary. She contacted me right away when I sent in my application. She's a traveler, so we are perfect for each other."

"You're leaving Gothic City?"

"Yes. Zelaide is gone and I have nothing to keep me here. I'm going to find happiness on my own. Maybe I'll even run into Zel during my travels. If I do, I'll push him down and make him mine without a second thought," Palmina said, trying to goad her.

Euphemia had no reason to get angry though. Even Palmina understood that Zelaide could no longer belong to another woman or be forced back into human society. He would only come back when he was ready. Waiting was all they could do.

"Are you going to live...in this house?" Palmina looked around the house that used to look unlivable. Now it brimmed with Euphemia's personal belongings and work equipment.

"I will be here for when he returns." Euphemia rested her hand on her belly.

"Hmm... How is it possible that you make me hate you more by the minute? Anyway, this is the name and contact information for my new boss. I wrote it down on paper so you can get rid of it if you want to. But, if you have a heart, let me know when Zelaide comes back... Goodbye." Palmina stuffed a balled up piece of paper into Euphemia's hand. Then she coldly turned around and strode

out of the house.

“...Pal is leaving too?” Euphemia exhaled a small sigh.

Palmina was neither her friend nor someone she enjoyed talking to, but they were both women who had fallen for Zelaide and experienced the same plights over him. Losing the only person she could talk to about him did make her feel a little lonely. She casually glanced down at the piece of paper crinkled in her hand.

“WHAAAT?! Hold on...is this who I think it is...?!”

The name and address written there belonged to someone Euphemia knew well: Marielle Ashencourt.

“She’s going to work for...Mom?!” she cried out.

Honestly, Zelaide, where did you go when I have so much to talk to you about? Please come back soon and give me a big hug. You don’t have to get stronger. You can just be you. I’m scared alone. So scared I could scream. But I won’t run away.

I’m right here. Come back soon. Don’t abandon me, my darling mate.

†††

SEVERAL years passed, the seasons changed, but the cycle of rain stayed the same.

A car drove through Forzarin Gate into Gothic City. The silver car smoothly wound its way around the ring roads of Out, Middle, and Center Circle. The streak of silver zooming down the roads looked beautiful to the oncoming traffic. No other cars could match its speed, giving it the right of way. Turning off the spacious six-lane circle course, the car pulled into a residential district flanked by rows of trees and greenery.

Young spring leaves cast a gentle, swaying shadow on the hood.

The last drop of rain marking the change from night to day, streamed down the tinted windshield. The driver was a man with long silver hair.

He pulled into a public parking lot and got out of the car. Heavy leather boots hit the concrete. Between his dark sunglasses and black leather coat, he appeared threatening to anyone who saw him. With his muscular build and rough attire, he stood out as someone who didn’t belong in this peaceful, high-end

neighborhood. Yet the man had a calm, nonbelligerent air about him.

He walked down to the corner of the high-end residential street. His eyes were trained forward the whole way.

Eventually the road took him to the side of a large mansion. The solid, elegant house protected by high walls and an excellent security system was once used by him as one of his many hideouts in this city.

He went no further.

Leaning his back against the thick wall, he wrestled with himself. One more step around the corner and he would come out in front of his old house.

What am I doin' after all this time? The question that haunted him endlessly whispered forward again. Sighing was his only answer.

His broad shoulders slumped, betraying his muscular physique. Then his excellent hearing picked up on a metallic sound. The large mansion gates were opening.

He braced himself.

Carefully sticking his head around the corner, he spotted a young woman slowly pulling out of the driveway.

His heart did a painful flip upon seeing the face he hadn't forgotten for a single day. If he hadn't been restraining himself, he would have jumped out to see her.

She drove a small pink car that put safety first. He didn't recognize it. Her car from a few years ago was white. The rear seat windows were tinted blue, possibly to block out sunlight. The car drove off after the gate closed firmly behind it. The man quickly followed. Tailing by car would be too obvious, so he went by foot. He easily ran just as fast on foot. Someone keeping speed with a car stood out worse than if he had been driving. But he didn't seem to realize.

Where's she goin' alone?

Before long, the car parked in a small lot under the trees. It was the neighborhood park. She seemed to be going for a morning jog. The driver's door opened and a woman in casual attire stepped out. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun and she had a sweater on.

The man dove behind a tree to hide.

Ahh...ahhh...she hasn't changed a bit. The man—Zelaide—was captivated by her beauty. *Yumi...my Euphemia!*

Unaware of his presence, Euphemia opened the rear car door and leaned in.

Does she have somethin' heavy in the back? Why did she stop here instead of drivin' to her destination with it? Should I help her carry it?

As Zelaide was racking his brain, Euphemia pulled whatever she was fiddling with in the back out and straightened up with it in her arms.

What...is that? Zelaide froze as if he had been struck by lightning.

Cradled in Euphemia's arms was a young child with gorgeous long gold hair just like her mother. He couldn't see her face from this angle, but he did see her little white hands and feet. They were clearly mother and daughter.

The pair happily walked the path into the park without realizing they had left a strong man crying in their wake. Once they were on the lawn and out of the way of cars, Euphemia bent over and put the child on the ground. She wore a spring dress the same color as the car and a matching straw hat.

That's...that's...that child is... Zelaide leaned against the tree to hold himself up. He could only see the mother and daughter's backs from where he stood.

Ahh. This is punishment for leaving my one and only mate behind.

His beloved, the owner of his body and soul, chose another man, slept with him, and gave birth to his child.

Euphemia was human. Humans had a shorter window to give birth than Beast Bloods. She had no reason to waste that precious time for the man who disappeared without even asking her to wait for him. He knew the price of his actions from the start.

And yet why did it feel like his heart had been struck by an unrecoverable blow?

Zelaide pushed off the tree and staggered after the pair as they walked hand in hand down the promenade.

The spring park was in full bloom.

Joggers and bicycles ran along the gently curving road surrounded by trees and the shadows they cast. Mother and daughter stayed on one side of the walkway to avoid them. The little girl kept pace with her mother despite her small size. She occasionally pointed out things with a grin and earned smiles from the older men and women she crossed paths with.

Zelaide was not in the mood to smile.

He knew he shouldn't make trouble for them, but he was irresistibly drawn to them. And murderous hatred burned inside him toward the unknown man who had taken his mate.

Who is he? Where is he?

A storm of unreasonable jealousy swept over him. Instinct beat out reason.

But what'll I do if I find him? Kill him? Won't that just take the child's father away and squash any lingering affection Euphemia might still have for me? I couldn't live with myself if that happened.

During the time he was away, Zelaide had encouraged himself to keep pressing on in moments of depression by recalling Euphemia's tenderness and love for him. He accepted every hard job he could find and challenged himself with any battle that would increase his experience and skill.

I not only trained myself to the utmost limit and achieved some of my goals, but I also learned how to work with humans. But that was all in vain. Or should I say it was useless from the start?

What was worth cultivating by traveling through every city, wasteland, and forest on the planet? Zelaide hadn't understood what really mattered. It wasn't strength.

Everything had ended for him the moment he cowered from asking her to wait for him. This was the punishment for running off and not devoting himself to his mate as soon as he found her.

He wasn't qualified to call himself a Beast Blood male.

I haven't become stronger. My heart's still just as weak. What was I tryin' to obtain comin' back this late in the game? Did I honestly believe gettin' on my knees and begging her to take me back would bring back our dreamlike time together?

I knew this would happen, didn't I? Today just ground it in.

The smiling mother and daughter entered the grassy field, leaving the man stricken with grief behind. Raising her voice in glee, the little girl dashed out onto the green carpet and the young mother threw her a red cloth ball from her bag.

In the warm park filled with sunlight and a gentle breeze, an icy storm raged within the Beast Blood.

Hiding in the bushes decorated with light-crimson flowers, Zelaide could only watch as Euphemia played toss with her daughter. Despite her young age, the little girl had amazing reflexes. She easily caught the ball Euphemia threw high into the air. She had peach-colored cheeks and lips, which made her look

like a marshmallow when paired with her pink dress.

I'm glad she looks like her mother... Zelaide felt wretched for only being able to think of petty things. Still, he couldn't pry his eyes away from them for even a second.

Just then, the ball her little hands threw with surprising strength slipped past her mother's reach. It rolled into his feet where he hid in the bushes. He had become so absorbed in his depressing thoughts he didn't notice until it was too late.

"...!" Zelaide gasped. He raised his eyes to a sparkling little face.

Their eyes locked in the shadows of the flowering bushes.

The girl only came up to his knees when he was crouched and bent over. She curiously stared at the unfamiliar man.

"....."

An infinite amount of time seemed flow by, but it was only a second. She picked up the ball and stared at his face some more. Then she reached out with her small hand.

"...!"

She grabbed his sunglasses before he could react. She had exposed the side of him he didn't want seen. A large man and a little girl were crouched in the flowering bushes, staring at each other.

"Shiny eyes," she lisped.

Zelaide was speechless. The girl's teal eyes seemed to glow for a moment in the shallow shadows.

"Zephy? Zephyr? What are you doing? Did you find the ball?"

The bushes rustled and in stepped his precious mate.

"...!"

"Ah...ah!"

Euphemia froze, her adorable mouth hanging open as she pointed at him. Those emerald green eyes were brighter than the grass at his feet and didn't lose in impact to the glowing eyes of her daughter at his feet. He reached out—

Idiot! You can't! Zelaide sprung up, scattering branches and flowers with his head.

Euphemia stood there in shock. Dogs could be heard playfully barking as they chased after a Frisbee.

Bathed in morning light, the park was the epitome of peaceful. The cool spring breeze blew.

"...Agh!"

He was overwhelmed by the lovely tenderness that jumped into his chest. The crimson petals danced around them, but a sweeter scent than the flowers washed over him. His nostrils were filled with his mate's scent. He unconsciously hugged her back. His subconscious desires chased away his pensive thoughts.

"Zel! Zel! Zel!" Euphemia cried as she clung to his neck. She continued to say his name until her voice gave way to sobs.

"Yu—"

"Zel...Zel...Why...?"

"Yumi..."

"...D-Don't just disappear on me..." she hiccuped. "...You jerk! You said I was your mate!"

"Ugh," he groaned.

"Don't ugh me! Idiot! Jerk!" She pounded her fists against his chest.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry... Yumi."

What else could he do but apologize? Zelaide kept apologizing as he grew intoxicated on the smell coming from his love's hair.

"I-I've been waiting for you all this time! You made me sick of waiting!"

"Yeah, I know..."

So she got sick of waiting and... Zelaide looked at the ground. A cute little girl crawled out of the bushes.

"...Mama?" The little girl didn't seem surprised by her mother's sudden breakdown. She looked up at her with the same big, round eyes. Her irises were no longer glowing, but the sunlight seemed to make her entire face sparkle.

"...Yumi! We can't do this...she's watching..." Heartrending emotion warred on Zelaide's face. He pushed Euphemia away and covered his face with both arms. "Don't make me see..."

This girl was the child of the man who had come into Euphemia's life after she had grown sick of waiting around for Zelaide.

He had accidentally stared at the girl earlier, but her mere existence was a stake to his heart. If he had known this was what was waiting for him, he would've never come back. His moment of self-denial shattered.

That proved it: he had grown weaker, not stronger. He needed to go back and start over from step one again. Or maybe he would be better off gouging out his own heart and dying...

Zelaide trudged through the bushes to get away, but cast one last remorseful glance toward the mate he had lost forever.

"I'm sorry, Yumi. Showin' up now will only bring ya trouble... I'll leave for good. Stay happy—"

Euphemia ran the distance he made between them and slapped him. "You big fool! Don't be frightened off by your own child!"

His one and only mate glowered at him.

"How can I be happy?! Both me and my girl have been waiting years for you! This is *YOUR DAUGHTER!*" Euphemia put her hands on her daughter's shoulders and pushed her toward Zelaide.

The Beast Blood only saw her for a second before the world rushed up and for the first time in his life Zelaide fainted.

†††

"....."

"Zel! Zelaide! Wake up! Oh my stars... What in the universe is with today...?!"

"Mama? Mama!"

Zelaide heard whining and complaining right beside his ears. It should have been the most annoying sound, but those voices comfortably permeated his mind. He opened his eyes. An endless blue sky filled his vision.

"Oh! He opened his eyes! Are you all right, Zel?"

Shadows blocked out a piece of the blue sky. Two faces peered down at him. The smaller and rounder of the two was flapping her lips, trying to say something.

"Shiny...eyes."

That was the same thing she said to him before.

"...Ugh."

Zelaide's eyes quickly adjusted to the light. It was hard to believe, but he had passed out. But not for long, if the sound of that same dog chasing the Frisbee was anything to go by.

"I—"

"You gave me a serious scare! You were too heavy for me to hold up, so when you fell you crushed the branches behind you. How do you feel? Does your head hurt? Your pulse is fine, but should I call an ambulance for you?" Euphemia calmly assessed his status like a scientist as she checked his pulse.

"I'm not sick, Yumi!" His eyes shifted to the girl staring at him from her mother's side. "She's..."

"Me?" the girl pointed to herself and tilted her head.

"This girl is..."

"Didn't you hear me? This is your daughter, Zephyr," Euphemia introduced their daughter to Zelaide, then turned to the girl. "See this man, Zephy? He's your daddy."

"Daddy?" Zephyr repeated.

"That's right. Your daddy."

"W-Wait. You mean she resulted from our one time together?" Zelaide struggled to come to grips with the situation.

She's a child born of the time Euphemia and I madly made love after I was acquitted and came home to her?

No words could describe how he felt. He thought it was almost impossible to have children with a human.

"Yes. I realized I was pregnant a few months after you left."

"....."

"I carried her a great deal longer than nine months, but she's two now. She's clearly your child. She's much stronger and tougher than most toddlers."

"....."

"Dada?"

The fearless child dressed in all pink wouldn't stop looking at Zelaide's eyes.

"That's right. This is your daddy. Isn't he wonderful?"

Zelaide took a good look at the little girl mystified by him. She had her mother's looks and his eyes. He never felt one way or another about his eyes, but that clear teal color was remarkable on his daughter. She still had his sunglasses. She held them out to him.

"Here, Dada."

"Good girl, Zephy." Euphemia hugged her daughter. She looked at Zelaide with misty eyes as if asking him what he was going to do now.

Does that mean...you will forgive me? You're willing to love me again?

"Will you let me devote myself to you...?" he asked out loud.

"Yes...love me in your own way, just stay by my side. I want your love and your presence."

"...Love?"

"I've always loved you," she insisted. "And I'll continue to love

you. I won't let you go even if you want to this time."

"....."

"And if you do leave again, both your daughter and I will hate you." Euphemia shot the Beast Blood her angriest look yet.

"...Hate." Zelaide shivered, horrified by that word. "Don't... hate me... I might die."

"You blockhead! Don't talk about dying so easily! Listen here, buster. I gave birth all alone. Do you have any idea how long I carried our child, how much harder a Beast Blood child is to carry? I mean, Erica, my mom, and friends were there to support me, but...you weren't! Morning sickness sucked, I always felt anxious, and it hurt. But a man like you can't even begin to imagine my suffering, can you? I plan on talking your ear off about it, so you'd better stick around to listen okay, my beloved Beast Blood Zelaide!" Euphemia declared. A single teardrop fell from her eyes. "What's your answer?"

My beloved Beast Blood. Those words were all he needed.

Zelaide looked up at her and nodded hard enough it felt like whiplash. "I'll make it up to you... If you're okay with a worthless man like me, then I'll devote everything to you. You can have the rest of my days."

"You sure about that? I know Beast Bloods live longer, but you've already lived for half a century or so. I plan to live a long and healthy life, so who knows, we might die around the same time... Sure you want to give me the rest of your days?"

"Perfectly sure..."

"Then tell me what I want to hear," Euphemia ordered.

"Yumi...I love you, my mate."

On that night in the Wilds, he had come across a strong-willed woman holding a gleaming blade to her own throat, unwilling to let those rapists claim her. Their fates had been decided by that single encounter.

Euphemia didn't reject the hand gingerly reaching for her. His fingertips ran over her soft cheeks. Nothing about her had changed.

She returned his heated gaze. He had become sexier and even manlier than she remembered. She couldn't tell if he had lost weight or if that was just muscle.

They needed each other's kiss like they needed air.

Through their warm embrace they returned to the three months they had spent together and chased away the time spent

apart.

Zelaide sighed first. Their lips still touched as if they had forgotten to pull away.

How was I able to live without her?

"I won't let ya go again..."

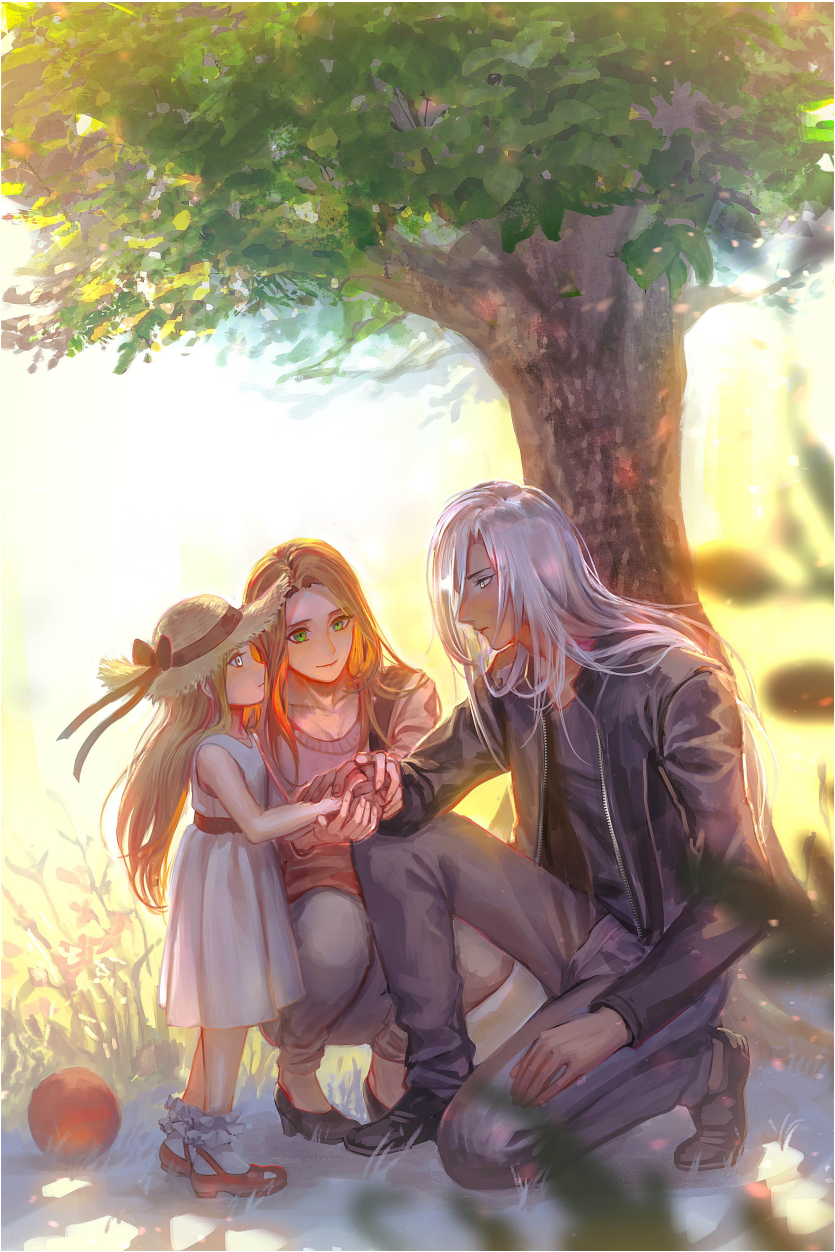
She's finally mine...and I'm finally hers.

"Mm..."

Zelaide clasped his mate tightly against his chest.

"Mama!" Zephyr whined, displeased the two adults weren't paying her any attention. She stomped her little feet and puffed out her red cheeks. Like Euphemia said, she had quite the personality for a two-year-old. In her hands, she still held his sunglasses.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Zephy." Euphemia quickly broke out of lovey-dovey mode and crouched in front of her daughter. She took her little hands and placed Zelaide's hands on them.



“Her name is Zephy?”

“Yep. It’s Zephyr. I took letters from her father and mother’s names. Isn’t it a great name? Pick her up.”

“I’m Zephy!” the little girl proudly exclaimed her name.

The Beast Blood’s vision was dominated by the two people he loved most in the world.

“Zephy...I’m your dad,” he said gently.

“Da...?” Her little hand held out his sunglasses. She finally smiled when he accepted it and put them in his pocket.

“Haha. Wasn’t returning my specs the first real ice-breaker between us in the beginning too?” Euphemia asked, smiling with nostalgia. She had matured into a mother, but she hadn’t lost her vigor or beauty from the day they met.

“Da!”

“That’s me, Zephy. Thank you. I promise I will...” His strong arms reached out and pulled his two precious people to his chest as if that was the place they had always belonged. “...Love you both until the day I die.”

The Beast Blood finally embraced love and hope with his mate and child by his side forevermore.

THE END

Afterword

HELLO everyone living throughout the world! I'm Sato Fumino.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *Beast † Blood Volume 2*. In this volume, things get more intense romantically and in the action department. There are spoilers for the volume ahead, so make sure you read it first before proceeding!

I love Zelaide and Euphemia, but I put extra special care into writing Burhardt—aka Shank.

He is a man with a complicated past and many personalities, but he acted the part of a considerate gentleman while working at Biotech. That side of him wasn't a complete lie, but just one of the many personas he carries. He's insanely skilled with his hands and is a man of many talents who can pull off just about anything.

On the opposite hand, he absolutely despises the Beast Blood blood coursing through his veins. But no matter how much he hates it, Beast Blood genes wildly surpass human genes, leaving him with excellent physical ability and eyes that shine in the dark. Living longer than humans, though not quite as long as pure Beast Bloods, he has suffered in many ways and is mentally anguished. There are dreams and loves he has given up on with the passage of time.

Depicting the main characters' actions and mental turmoil was the focus of the overall story, so I had to leave out Shank's deeper thoughts and feelings, but I tried to write him as an intriguing, realistic villain.

I hope once you read this afterword that it will make you go back and reread the scenes with him to see what I mean.

Now, there is one other character (if you can call it that) that I am very fond of in *Beast † Blood*.

Bijours.

The Bijour are modeled after the Velociraptor dinosaur. However, these ferocious creatures are much larger than Velociraptors and have fully developed arms. Their whole body is covered in pink scales, and this beautiful creature deceives its prey with a sweet fragrance. If you are attacked by such a monster,

you're doomed.

Aside from the Bijour, you also have Zelaide's pet pterosaur Topsy. The constant appearance of different creatures is one of my favorite things about *Beast † Blood*'s world.

And of course the climax focused on the fight between Beast Bloods. I wrote many different action scenes up until that point, but I put even more effort into fleshing this scene out. I referenced the moves used in my favorite samurai movies for it.

Beast † Blood is full of thrilling, on the edge of your seat scenes. Did you enjoy them?

I am beyond grateful to Akira Egawa for bringing life to my story through stunning illustrations that accurately convey the cruel beauty of the Bijour and the Beast Bloods.

To my dear readers, your reviews have reached me all the way in Japan and I look forward to reading your thoughts on volume two!

Finally, I would like to express my utmost gratitude to Cross Infinite World and Charis Messier for presenting me with the opportunity to have my books translated into English!

I am currently writing more stories in Japanese, hoping that someday they will find their way into your hands like *Beast † Blood* has.

April 2020
Sato Fumino



THE WEREWOLF COUNT AND THE TRICKSTER TAILOR

STORY BY: YURUKA MORISAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: TSUKITO
VOL. 1 / OUT NOW

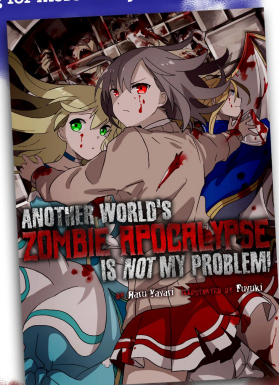
"I don't care if you are a man, let me court you."

Rock's whole life is shaken when a werewolf shows up at her shop in the middle of the night...asking for more than just clothes!

ANOTHER WORLD'S ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE IS NOT MY PROBLEM!

STORY BY: HARU YAYARI
ILLUSTRATION BY: FUYUKI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Just when I thought navigating high school was bad enough, I woke up to a rotting, post-apocalyptic world!



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STORY BY: TSUKASA MIKUNI
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MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO
MAKE A LOVE POTION!**
STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, straight-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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